

READING THE *SHIBBOLETH*: DERRIDA – DE MAN – ROUSSEAU

Stefan ESPOSITO¹

- **ABSTRACT:** This essay performs an original reading of Jacques Derrida's "Acts," a memorial written for Paul de Man that endeavors to answer the question, "What is the legacy of deconstruction?" with reference to the question of deconstruction as a type of community, and also with reference to the repercussions of deconstruction for our understanding of the limits of community (the problem of the shibboleth). Focusing on an interruption in "Acts" that concerns the "Rhetoric of Blindness" debate between Derrida and de Man over whether or not Rousseau should be read as a member of the community of deconstruction *avant la lettre*, the present essay argues against past evaluations of the debate that portray it in terms of simple antagonism. As Derrida makes clear in "Acts" the debate over whether or not Rousseau utters a certain type of shibboleth, and whether or not any text or speech act can offer a shibboleth concerning its self-conscious use of always already indeterminate language, aptly distills the problem of the limits of community and the conditions of possibility for community, a problem that must necessarily be thought through in any discussion of the legacy of deconstruction.
- **KEYWORDS:** Deconstruction. Community. Shibboleth. Rousseau. Rhetoric.

Prologue

The title of this study posits the existence of a community, albeit a small one: three names, three figures, three intertwined stories. These figures are invoked, each name interrupted by the next, in order to read through the implications of a problematic question posed some 23 years ago by Jacques Derrida in his *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*: What will be the legacy of deconstruction?

Derrida's text offers no easy answers, and nothing resembling a systematic plan for the future. However, read carefully, the final chapter of Derrida's attempt at "mourning the death of a friend," entitled "Acts," appears as more allegory than

¹ Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature. Yale University. New Haven - Connecticut-USA- 06520. stefan.esposito@yale.edu

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eology. Although Derrida (1986a, p.1) begins *Mémoires* with the confession, “I have never known how to tell a story,” “Acts” is decidedly the story of a community, and of the relationship between deconstruction and the question of community itself.

For Derrida, writing in 1984, the death of Paul de Man threatens the future existence of “deconstruction in America,” a community whose limits – despite having then existed for almost 20 years – are anything but clear. With Derrida’s recent death, emphasis returns to the question subtending his memorial address: W(h)ither “deconstruction in America”?² Many a recent article has hinged upon the presence or absence of that unvoiced ‘h.’

Critics attempting to define the “whither” rather than the “wither,” have frequently found themselves drawn to consider the applicability of deconstruction to the question of community. From the strange (all-too-operable) community that is the 21st century corporate boardroom, to the amorphous, globalized connections that increasingly problematize organic conceptions of community: deconstruction often has something insightful to offer. And these insights have been anything but univocal. Often they occur at the intersection of deconstruction and Marxism (Pheng Cheah’s “spectral nationality,” or Hardt and Negri’s “multitude,”) or at the intersection of deconstruction and theology (Agamben’s quasi-utopian “whatever” [*qualunque*]). Indeed, it could be said that the best work performed by deconstruction in recent years has been in dialogue with the question of community. However, those on the side of “wither,” have repeatedly voiced concerns as to whether the persistent “nihilism” of deconstruction prevents any genuine or constructive mobilization of any movement, group, or affiliation, let alone something that can genuinely be called community.

Rather than debate the respective merits of these claims and end up declaring deconstruction dead, barely breathing, or hale, the present study will evaluate the legacy of deconstruction as a question of community on Derrida’s own terms. Looking closely into “Acts,” we will soon find – as Derrida finds – that this entails accounting for Rousseau’s role in the history of deconstruction. But, why Rousseau? Why not Heidegger, Nietzsche, or Mallarmé? At first glance this other trio is more exemplary of and for deconstruction than Rousseau. But this is precisely the issue at hand. Those others are easily assimilated into deconstruction as a community, into the idea of deconstruction as a group of subjects. But, Rousseau is troublesome. Derrida wants him out. De Man wants him in. As such, Rousseau raises for

² The steady levels of critical interest in Gilles Deleuze, and the booming American prestige of Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Rancière would seem to have rendered the “death of theory” discourse moot. The “death of theory” argument has always only been an attempt to dispose of the troublesome corpus of “deconstruction.” See, as instances: Critical Inquiry (2004); Mehlman (2007); Boyd (2006) and Patai and Corral (2005).

deconstruction the problem implicit in every community, the problem of the limits of community, and how these limits can be marked in language. This is an old and persistent problem. In the Hebrew bible it takes the form of the problem of the *shibboleth*:

And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was *so*, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, *Art* thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce *it* right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand³.

How can we “frame to pronounce” the question of the future of deconstruction “right”? How do we account for *the* history (past, present, or future) of a movement, community, or school of thought whose core principles problematize *any* attempt at accounting? If we wish to speak of the future of *this* community, can we correctly pronounce *its* terms, and achieve what Derrida (1986b, p.322) calls, in an article on Paul Celan entitled “Shibboleth,” the “legitimate habitation of a language”?⁴. Or will we be cut down before the passages we wish to read?

These three questions ultimately reduce to one: How do we begin to tell the story of the future of a community? Whether or not it is a question of deconstruction, the question of community must, Derrida warns, begin with Rousseau and *the* problem posed by beginning to read Rousseau. So then, ‘*S(h)ibboleth*,’ and into the passages: “Abandon hope all ye who enter”⁵.

“Rousseau”, Derrida (1986a, p.125) writes in “Acts,” “is not one proper name among others in de Manian deconstruction”. Rousseau, for de Man, is *the* proper name. His texts, like de Man’s own, signify with an awareness that, as de Man claims in *Allegories of Reading*, “unmediated expression is a philosophical impossibility” (DE MAN, 1983, p.9)⁶. Accordingly, de Man privileges Rousseau as a radical case,

³ *Judges* 12: 5-6, King James translation.

⁴ Many of the issues raised in “Acts” are also taken up by Derrida’s “Shibboleth” essay, and one could approach the same questions through that text. As I am principally interested in the debate between de Man and Derrida, and the threat it poses to “deconstruction,” “Acts” seems the more appropriate point of entry.

⁵ *Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate*, Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto III, line 9.

⁶ Percy Shelley and Friedrich Hölderlin also occasionally appear as exemplary “non-blinded” authors in de Man’s oeuvre, but even here, Rousseau lurks in the background, cf. De Man (1984a, 1984b).

a radical exception in his collection of essays *Blindness and Insight*. “Rousseau’s text has no blind spots,” de Man (1983, p.139, emphases added) claims, “*it* accounts at all moments for *its* own rhetorical mode”. This capacity for self-reflection, for a textual *profession de soi*, cements Rousseau’s exemplarity for de Man’s critical project; Rousseau is the figure(r) *par excellence* of the inexorably figural nature of language.

De Man even cites Rousseau as a point of origin. This origin is an *aporia*, a roadblock hindering “progress,” but an origin nonetheless. The introduction to *Allegories of Reading* explains:

Allegories of Reading started out as a historical study and ended up as a theory of reading. I began to read Rousseau seriously in preparation for a historical reflection on Romanticism and found myself unable to progress beyond local difficulties of interpretation. In trying to cope with this, I had to shift from historical definition to the problematics of reading. (DE MAN, 1979, p.xi)⁷.

The “local difficulties of interpretation” presented by “read[ing] Rousseau seriously” lead de Man to develop a theory regarding the general difficulties of interpretation presented by any reading. Beginning to read Rousseau *seriously* is the origin of de Manian deconstruction.

Of course, a phrase as paradoxical as “the origin of (de Manian) deconstruction” must account for itself. To blatantly assert an origin for a category or name (deconstruction) that defines itself with reference to the impossibility of origins... such a statement must be ironic. Mustn’t it? But, if we take this rhetorical question seriously, the problem expands. One question divides into three:

- 1) Can the present text, or any other, make a reflexive gesture towards its own irony or rhetoricity?
- 2) Can a text fail to be self-reflexive?
- 3) Can rhetoric account for rhetoric?

Any extended interrogation of these questions would doubtlessly reach another *aporia*. But we mustn’t lose hope. According to Derrida’s “Acts,” this apparent roadblock is in fact the condition upon which deconstruction, and reading itself

⁷ De Man’s ostensive “shift from historical definition to the problematics of reading” is, of course, a rhetorical origin story, much like the historical investigation of the symbol in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” The authoritative text on de Man’s ironical appropriations of historical and temporal terminology is Carol Jacobs, “Allegories of Reading Paul de Man,” in *Reading de Man Reading*. Here, Jacobs (1989, p.117) writes: “[...] as de Man’s irony becomes increasingly conscious of itself, it demonstrates the impossibility of being historical. It rejects its own temporal movement of correcting error to produce (illusory) wisdom and recognizes it or rather performs it as a problem that exists within the rhetoric of temporality.”

are possible. Any consideration of the legacy, that is to say, the past, present and future possibility of deconstruction, must revolve around the void opened by these questions.

These are precisely the questions that emerge when one attempts to account for Rousseau's position in the history of deconstruction. Derrida's memorial grants Rousseau a genetic status similar to that accorded him in de Man's *Allegories*, though here the point of origin is collective, a site of shared filiation:

Rousseau has played a singular role for Paul de Man and me. And from the very first day of our meeting, in Baltimore in 1966, when we had begun with *this* by evoking *l'Essai sur l'origine des langues*, a text then little read and on which we were both in the process of working. Beginning with this memory, of which the only thing that I retain is the memory, of which the only thing that I retain is the name Rousseau, I passed to the following remark: the entire – interrupted – history of de Manian deconstruction passes through Rousseau. (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.127 emphasis added).

“Rousseau” begins “*this*.” He initiates a friendship, the nucleus of a community that will come to be called “deconstruction in America” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.122). Derrida cannot account for the content of his discussion with de Man. But the figure “Rousseau” remains embedded in his memory. Even before “it is a question of deconstruction” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.126), “Rousseau” links de Man and Derrida, and begins “*this*,” a history-to-come.

However “*this*” is not prefigured by Rousseau alone, but rather by a problem posed by beginning with Rousseau. Derrida (1986a, p.128) continues, “Rousseau-and-Nietzsche, then, and I said to myself that, curiously, this couple had always haunted me, me too, and well before I was in a position to refer to them in public works.” Derrida (1986a, p.128) goes on to make his own *profession de soi* (“...here it comes, we are approaching the genre of ‘memoirs,’ in its worst form’...”) in order to recount the shared history connecting him and de Man before they met: “I said to myself, then [in 1966] yes, for him it had also been Rousseau and Nietzsche, all in all, the two bodies or two parts of *Allegories of Reading*.” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.128). Thus, Derrida and de Man are coupled by the shared significance of another couple (Rousseau and Nietzsche). Two are made one by virtue of two. But is this other couple one (a duality become singular: Rousseau – Nietzsche) or two (a couple whose eternal separation may be signified by a disjunctive copula: Rousseau-*and*-Nietzsche?). The “entire – interrupted – history” of “deconstruction in America” begins with these questions: Can two bodies, two texts be made “all in all” one? From the start, then, “deconstruction in America” emerges out of a question of the tenability and limits of community, the question of the *shibboleth*.

Derrida's "*this*" begins with the problem of the *shibboleth*, but the *shibboleth* in turn threatens the possibility for "*this*," the nucleus, to proliferate into something resembling a community. Midway through recounting his "interrupted history of deconstruction," Derrida interrupts himself with a seemingly tangential digression. Derrida is pulled up short by his own story. The problem is this: "Rousseau," half of the originary odd couple that in turn couples de Man to Derrida is also the source of their most fundamental disagreement:

This is the important essay entitled "The Rhetoric of Blindness," which proposes an original and new reading of Rousseau, defines that concept of the 'rhetoric of blindness' which organizes all of the work in the book [*Blindness and Insight*], and disputes a reading of Rousseau that I [Derrida] had proposed in a recently published book [*Of Grammatology*]. (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.125).

This dispute over a reading of Rousseau, which Richard Klein's "The Blindness of Hyperbole: The Ellipses of Insight" calls the "[...] most uncanny, most insane, most bizarrely interesting critical encounter imaginable" (KLEIN, 1973, p.34), appears as an irruptive event in Derrida's final memorial lecture⁸. When read in terms of this interruption, Derrida's alternately playful and mournful meanderings in "Acts" ask us to consider the future of "deconstruction in America" in terms of a debate over whether rhetoric can account for itself. Put bluntly, the history (past, present, and future) of deconstruction as a community hinges upon whether or not Rousseau pronounces a *shibboleth*.

Critical history has not been kind to Paul de Man when it comes to "The Rhetoric of Blindness." The textual showdown between de Man and Derrida has been uniformly decided in Derrida's favor. Indeed, Derrida's first explicit, though paraleiptic, entry into the debate in "Acts" invokes the proper names of the critics who called the match in his favor:

I will not enter here into this debate, for many reasons. First of all, because it still remains a bit enigmatic to me. Next, because others, including Paul de Man, have themselves returned to *this* debate and have done so better than I could do it here. I again think of Rodolphe Gasché, Suzanne Gearhart, Richard Klein, David Carroll. Finally, and above all, if there must be a last word on this debate, I want it to come from Paul de Man. I can only, from

⁸ "The Rhetoric of Blindness" was written for the 1971 edition of *Blindness and Insight*, and also appears in *Dialectical Anthropology* v.2, n.1 p.1-18, 1977

now on, speak of him in the desire to speak for him, in the desire to speak with him and finally, to leave to him the chance to speak. (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.125, emphasis mine).

Although the passage invokes the names Gasché, Klein, Gearhart and Carroll, it is also decidedly dismissive. Despite their critical appraisals, the problem remains “enigmatic.” Derrida lists those who have responded “better than I could do it here,” but immediately shifts the debate back to himself and de Man. Names are recounted. Arguments are not.

Accordingly we must read the introductory sentence of this passage, “I will not enter here into this debate,” in all its ambivalence. Derrida will not enter *this* debate. He “[...] will not touch directly on this public debate, but speak indirectly of it for a brief moment in order to make a few private remarks.” The passage is literally a tangent: “...memories intersect here...” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.125-126). It touches the public debate and the proper names of its participants, but suddenly veers away. The final account will emerge from an invocation of this critical debate, but will end in a different realm entirely. As Derrida says, “I want it to come from Paul de Man.” Put otherwise: the final account will come from beyond the grave (read: the final account will never come). The “private remarks” Derrida seeks to add are meant, then, to open up an odd space where Derrida’s speech act at once becomes de Man’s (“speak of him in the desire to speak for him”), yet maintains the otherness of de Man’s voice (“in the desire to speak with him”), while also allowing de Man’s voice to override his own (“to leave him a chance to speak”). One might say that this convoluted speech act seeks to enter (again, or for the first time?) into community with de Man. From here on it is no longer Derrida and de Man, but Derrida–de Man.

This moment in the middle of Derrida’s speech is the most important of the lecture. Here, the tacit trajectory of his remarks in “Acts,” “To speak to you... of *the* future of a thought, of what Paul de Man has bequeathed to us...” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.93), comes into unavoidable conflict with his desire to “not enter here into *this* debate” over Rousseau. Pondering the indebtedness of de Man’s thought to Rousseau, Nietzsche and Hölderlin, the “three Madmen of Western Modernity!” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.128), Derrida realizes that *the* question of de Man’s legacy, and *the* future of “deconstruction in America,” are intimately entwined with *this* debate. Derrida writes:

I daydreamed a bit on this theme of madness – the figure of de Manian thinking as a thinking of madness, a thinking of memory or a history of Western and modern madness, of a madness of America, not in the sense that America would be mad but in the sense that it is necessary to think it

from the perspective of mad lucidity, under the light of lunacy. I daydreamed in these realms without knowing where I was going, and without knowing if I ought to go ahead and publish such fragments from a letter; at least this would interest friends, readers or students of de Man and add a public contribution to the debate surrounding Rousseau. (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.129).

This daydream on madness is itself an instance of madness. The moment of the daydream, “under the light of lunacy,” is the moment when Derrida’s prose can no longer account for itself. Though he claims he “will not enter here into this debate,” namely the “public debate,” the daydream compels him to “add a public contribution to the debate surrounding Rousseau.” Is he entering, then, or not? And which debate is taking place? The public? The private? In other words, does the tangential invocation mentioned above interrupt and separate or interrupt and conjoin? Is the debate now public–private, or public-and-private? Does Derrida wish for the odd speech act approximating a private colloquy (Derrida–de Man) to override the past public debate surrounding Derrida-and-de Man? Hardly. Rather, Derrida’s moment of madness playfully reiterates the main point of this seemingly self-contained interruption in the text; the debate in question existed before “The Rhetoric of Blindness” was subject to public scrutiny. *This* public debate merely dramatizes *the* foundational question of deconstruction.

To underscore this point, Derrida enters the public debate with quotations from private correspondence, “fragments from a letter” that predate the public showdown. De Man’s voice appears in the middle of “Acts” as a quotation from “[...] a letter dated July 9, 1970, from Zumikon in Switzerland, before the publication of ‘The Rhetoric of Blindness’”. The fragment is de Man’s reply to a letter Derrida (1986a, p.129) wrote “to thank Paul de Man” for “the manuscript” of “The Rhetoric of Blindness”. In response to Derrida’s thanks, de Man scolds:

The other day was neither the time nor the place to speak again of Rousseau and I do not know if you have any reason to return to the question. Your “supposed” agreement [this is a word I must have written in my letter] can only be kindness, for if you object to what I have to say about metaphor, you must, as it should be, object to everything. My essay moves through for economic reasons, a whole series of questions and complications which, in my eyes, do not weaken *the* central proposition. I do not know yet why you keep refusing Rousseau the value of radicality which you attribute to Mallarmé and no doubt to Nietzsche; I believe that it is for hermeneutic rather than historical reasons, but I am probably wrong. The text will appear in October in *Poétique* in a translation which seems to me faithful. (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.129, emphasis mine).

Even before the article appears in print, de Man foresees the two main terms of the subsequent public debate: Rousseau's exemplarity/radicality and the theory of metaphor found in his *l'Essai sur la origine des langues*. When read carefully, however, these two problems are really one. They are mere dramatizations of "the central proposition" of "The Rhetoric of Blindness": a central proposition intimately connected to the problem of the *shibboleth*.

So then, how does "The Rhetoric of Blindness" begin *this* public debate? Appropriately, the origins are not so clear-cut. De Man effectively begins the debate a year before "The Rhetoric of Blindness" appears, before Derrida receives the manuscript that prompts his "thanks." De Man's review article on Derrida's *Of Grammatology* from 1970 sketches out the argument later elaborated by "The Rhetoric of Blindness":

A critical reading of Derrida might therefore take two different directions. On the one hand, we might reproach him for giving too much weight to Rousseau's "premodernist" texts and passages, for overemphasizing factors of distance, negativity, and historical arbitrariness that must give way before the massive affirmation of fulfilled presence, in its immediate or elegiac form, found in so many famous pages. We might, in particular, invoke the most strictly "poetic" passages of Rousseau's oeuvre, precisely in the *logocentric* sense of the word, which appear in the works Derrida neglects (*Julie, Reveries*, certain passages of the *Confessions*). But we might also argue in the opposite direction and show that in these very "poetic" texts appears *a* conception of language of which Derrida's very account is merely *a* discursive version. We owe a great deal to Jacques Derrida for having imposed on the interpretation of Rousseau the necessity of making such a choice, and for having designated with an exemplary philosophical lucidity the site where this choice must be made. (DE MAN, 1989, p.217, emphases mine).

"The Rhetoric of Blindness" chooses this latter interpretation and "argue[s] in the opposite direction."

Seizing upon the fact that Rousseau locates the origins of language in non-referential metaphor rather than nominalization, de Man (1983, p.136) reads what Rousseau "says about representation and metaphor as the cornerstone of a theory of rhetoric". He goes on to claim that Rousseau presents "*a* conception of language" in *l'Essai sur l'origine des langues* of which de Man and Derrida's own theories are merely "*a* discursive version." In de Man's reading, a conception of language as always already rhetorical is precisely Rousseau's main concern and greatest insight:

All sequential language is dramatic, narrative language. It is also the language of passion because passion, in Rousseau, is precisely the manifestation of a will that exists independently of *any specific meaning or intent and that therefore can never be traced back to a cause or origin.*" (DE MAN, 1983, p.132, emphasis added).

Rousseau thus deconstructs the very notion of origin that his text invokes: "It [Rousseau's essay] can only tell this story as a fiction [invoking the origin of language as it subverts it], knowing that the fiction will be taken for fact and the fact for fiction; such is the necessarily ambivalent nature of literary language" (DE MAN, 1983, p.136). De Man casts Rousseau's theory of rhetoric as a *shibboleth*. As such, de Man grants Rousseau the "radicality" that Derrida denies him. For Rousseau's story of the origin of language successfully pronounces the "h" that announces him as a fellow Gileadite, a "de-bunker of the arche (or origin)" on par with Derrida, Nietzsche or de Man himself (DE MAN, 1979, p.9).

De Man's concomitant critique of Derrida is this: Derrida does not account for the rhetorical nature of Rousseau's invocation of origins. *Of Grammatology* again and again tries to catch Rousseau red-handed hypostasizing a stable point of ordinary reference. Derrida presents a history of *logocentrism*, "Heidegger's and Nietzsche's fiction of metaphysics as a *period* in Western thought" (DE MAN, 1983, p.137, emphases in text) that relies heavily on Rousseau's theory of the origin of language to make its point. Derrida presents Rousseau as symptomatic of this *logocentric* "period," and even calls it "The Age of Rousseau." Why? Because Derrida (1974, p.275) believes that even though Rousseau "[...] does not permit himself the use of literal meaning...in spite of his intention and all appearance to the contrary, he also *begins...with literal meaning...*In a word he restores to the *expression of emotions* a literalness whose loss he accepts, from the very origin, in the *designation of objects [...]*"⁹. Rousseau fails to subvert, challenge, or deconstruct the notion of an origin. He merely displaces the origin from the act of naming an object in the world to the literal expression of an emotional response. In Derrida's portrayal, "Rousseau no longer locates the literal meaning in the referent of the metaphor as an object, but he interiorizes the object and makes the metaphor refer to an inner state of consciousness, a feeling or a passion." (DE MAN, 1983, p.133). For de Man, however, every seemingly literal statement in Rousseau is preemptively ironized by his theory of language as rhetoric. Derrida simply does not recognize or perhaps chooses not to hear Rousseau's *shibboleth*.

⁹ A more thorough investigation of the dynamics of Derrida's reading of Rousseau is beyond the scope of this paper. I cite *Of Grammatology* sparsely because the issue at hand is not whether Derrida *actually* misreads Rousseau, but how a tacit question of misreading becomes a question of the tenability of community in "Acts."

We should not, however, read this critique too hastily. For, as de Man (1983, p.138) claims: “What happens in Rousseau is exactly what happens in Derrida: a vocabulary of substance and of presence is no longer used declaratively but rhetorically...”. These curious remarks apply equally to de Man’s own text. One ought to read the title *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* as one would read the paratext “Symphony no. 9 in D minor.” The argument could be transposed into a different key, a different register, a different rhetoric, but then it would not be a critique of contemporary criticism. The terms “blindness” and “insight” embody an epistemological model couched in the metaphysics of presence. But, de Man’s text troubles this epistemological model, and the metaphysics on which it is based, precisely via a series of analyses on its own terms. In fact, de Man utters his own *shibboleth* in “The Rhetoric of Blindness.” He assures us that “critical blindness and critical insight” are not accusations of “semiconscious duplicity” at all, but rather “a necessity dictated and controlled by the very nature of critical language.” (DE MAN, 1983, p.111). Given this avowal, one must be wary of taking de Man’s critique of Derrida too literally.

In fact, de Man (1983, p.139) recognizes Derrida’s reading as a rhetorical reading. He grants that Derrida too pronounces a *shibboleth* concerning the ineluctable rhetoricity of language: Derrida’s “[...] chapter on method, on literary interpretation as deconstruction, is flawless in itself but made to apply to the wrong object.” Although Derrida espouses the same theory of rhetoric as Rousseau, he turns against a fellow Gileadite *in order to tell his own story* of “a recurrent error in judgment,” by which he means the history of the metaphysics of presence privileging speech over writing (DE MAN, 1983, p.139). Rather than re-telling Rousseau’s story of the origins of language as a story of “inexorable regression,” Derrida chooses to critique Rousseau. As such, Derrida’s “misreading” is inevitable. Merely by virtue of choosing to write in the critical mode, Derrida makes an example of Rousseau instead of making him exemplary. He has fallen into the trap of all critical rhetoric (the blindness/insight dichotomy). De Man (1983, p.140) clarifies: “Derrida did not choose to adopt this pattern: instead of having Rousseau deconstruct his critics, we have Derrida deconstructing a pseudo-Rousseau by means of insights that could have been gained from the ‘real’ Rousseau. The pattern is too interesting not to be deliberate.”

“Deliberate”: Derrida is not blind to what he is doing. Or, at least, none of us can see what language does behind our backs. As such, De Man’s critique is less directed at Derrida’s deafness to Rousseau’s *shibboleth* than at the fact that the “less mature” Derrida chooses to use “Rousseau as a sparring partner” to prove his point, whereas “Rousseau needed no equivalent mediating figure [...]” (DE MAN, 1983, p.140). If we read de Man’s categories of “blindness” and “insight” as rhetorical

appropriations of critical rhetoric (i.e. always in the process of deconstructing themselves), his critique collapses the multiple questions of Rousseau's theory of metaphor (rhetoric) and Rousseau's exemplarity into the single, one might say singular, question of the *shibboleth*. The question of critical understanding becomes a question of community. In choosing to write *his* story, Derrida decides to exclude Rousseau from the history of deconstruction: Derrida *contra* Rousseau. De Man's critique is less concerned with taking Derrida's reading to task than in scolding him for writing Rousseau *out* when he could just as well be written *in*.

However, the participants of the public debate invoked in "Acts" all choose not to read de Man's categories as rhetorical appropriations of critical language. Carroll, Gearhart and Klein all take de Man literally¹⁰. Yet, even as these critics approach "The Rhetoric of Blindness" in a manner diametrically opposed to the reading suggested above, each in turn unearths the centrality of the *shibboleth* concerning the rhetoricity of language. Seizing upon passages in de Man's text such as "The only literal statement that says what it means to say is the assertion that there can be no literal statements" (DE MAN, 1983, p.133), these critics argue that this *shibboleth* is de Man's criteria for entry into a community that can speak, as it were, beyond 'blindness' and 'insight.' That being the case, Carroll, Klein, and Gearhart logically conclude that de Man applies a double standard, a double *shibboleth*, when it comes to Derrida. For unlike Lukács, Poulet and Blanchot whom de Man considers blind to the insights of their own methodologies, de Man (1983, p.139) considers Derrida "a somewhat different case". As Klein (1973, p.40) puts it, de Man "[...] acquiesces to every major element of Derrida's enterprise; he even acknowledges the justice of Derrida's reading of Rousseau. What he wants, however, is to show that Derrida has in a certain fashion misrepresented Rousseau's knowledge – or the text's knowledge – of *its* own movement" (emphasis mine). Carroll's "Representation or the End(s) of History: Dialectic and Fiction" phrases the same concern thus: "In his critique of Derrida's reading of Rousseau, de Man posits a theory of literature in which the text is assumed to be totally self-conscious of itself at all times, a total presence, and to contain the presence of the 'real' author as well..." (CARROLL, 1980, p.220). Enter Gearhart (1984, p.252): "De Man argues that any theory of language whose first premise is that language is metaphorical by definition 'escapes

¹⁰ A literal reading of de Man's blindness/insight binary is really the only thing that unites these diverse texts. Carroll borrows much of his reading of Lukács from de Man, but undertakes to refute "The Rhetoric of Blindness" in the space of a footnote. A more developed, but ultimately equivalent version of his critique appears in his *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida*. Klein's text is characteristically incisive and artful. I differ with its conclusions solely insofar as Klein assumes Derrida's "deconstruction" to be a more rigorous and stronger interpretive practice than de Man's "reading." Gearhart's analysis is generally apt. However, the extent to which de Man thinks that the logocentric fallacy can be "escaped" is not supported beyond her literal reading of his *shibboleth*.

from the logocentric fallacy”’. Finally, back to Klein (1973, p.36): de Man’s categories of “blindness” and “insight” “[...] tend to presuppose the unity of a perception, thereby of a consciousness endowed with these qualities of vision”’.

Thus, the public debate is decided in Derrida’s favor because de Man’s categories break down at the moment “[...] where the force of Derrida’s text seizes upon de Man’s own categories – particularly those of blindness and insight – and whirls them around, puts them through subversions and perversions from which they never recover.” (KLEIN, 1973, p.39). These subversions and perversions resulting from the *potentias* of Derrida’s text expose the mere rhetoricity of de Man’s supposedly literal categories. Put otherwise, when de Man claims that there are instances where “...the literary text itself has areas of blindness...” and also a “[...] more complicated case of the non-blinded author – as we have claimed Rousseau to be...” (DE MAN, 1983 p.141) his categories imply a referential displacement similar to that which Derrida finds in Rousseau. Where Rousseau literalizes emotions, de Man literalizes consciousness. And, indeed one can read the whole second half of *Allegories of Reading*, where de Man systematically reads through Rousseau’s most famous works, as a response to critics who dismissed his critique of Derrida for relying on a phenomenological account of textual consciousness.

The stakes can be summed up thusly: de Man’s text seemingly demands that other texts pronounce a *shibboleth* that it itself does not pronounce. De Man valorizes Rousseau for pronouncing this *shibboleth*. He even grants that Derrida pronounces the same *shibboleth*. Yet, the public debate insists that his categories of “blindness” and “insight” fail to obey the same law. They fail to pronounce a *shibboleth* signifying their own fictionality. De Man’s *shibboleth* cuts itself down by demanding a literal statement regarding the impossibility of literal language.

Despite de Man’s explicit caveat that I cited above, does he in fact fail to mark off the strategic fictionality of his own categories? Again, this question splits off into variants of the three questions that imposed themselves at the beginning of this study:

- 1) How does a text mark itself?
- 2) How does language speak itself?
- 3) Can rhetoric mark itself as rhetoric?

We might be inclined, at this point, to invoke these questions rhetorically as a critique of de Man. One might even say that this is the substance of Derrida’s veiled critique in “Acts,” a critique that approximates a “final word” on the debate. His convoluted, polyphonic invocation of de Man’s presence amounts to a “public contribution to the debate surrounding Rousseau” because it dramatizes the

impossibility of any speech act that “accounts at all moments” for itself. If we cannot tell who is speaking in the context of this memorial, how can we ever be sure that a speech act “knows and marks” itself? One need only look to Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context” (to cite only one of many possible exemplary texts) to assert that, for Derrida, the “speech act that accounts at all moments for its own rhetorical mode” is always already unsaid. Indeed, after quoting a second fragment from de Man’s personal correspondence, Derrida makes explicit the connection between the *shibboleth* and the purpose of his speech in “Acts”:

This was written in 1971 [the quoted correspondence] and I believe that we never again spoke of it [the debate over Rousseau], at least in the mode of conversation, direct discussion, or even of correspondence. And these silences belong to that vertiginous abyss of the unsaid, above which is situated, I do not say is grounded, the memory of a friendship, as the renewed fidelity of a promise. This unsaid is not always what goes without saying, but it is also erased in the incessant movement of a writing that remains to be deciphered. (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.131, emphasis added).

I write above, “Derrida makes explicit” in reference to a passage that appears to be anything but an explicit critique. But how does one make explicit a “vertiginous abyss of the unsaid,” or, rather, how does one present the unsayable? Precisely. The “vertiginous abyss” of the “unsaid” is exactly the problem at hand. Thus, this study reads “Acts” in relation to a word, *shibboleth*, that “Acts” never utters. The *shibboleth* is never pronounced; it can never be pronounced. If, as de Man (1979, p.10) claims, “rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration,” then no figure no matter how wise or nimble can make reference to its own rhetoric. De Man’s *shibboleth* renders “the question as to whether the author himself is or is not blinded [...] to some extent irrelevant...” and also renders “the true question: whether [an author’s] language is or is not blind to its own statement” equally irrelevant and thoroughly unanswerable (DE MAN, 1983, p.137).

Thus, de Man’s critique of Derrida crumbles along with any attempt to conceive of “deconstruction” as a community, or a community-to-come. Following de Man’s logic, there can be no *shibboleth*. No limit can be drawn. Any attempt at accounting, or distinguishing Gileadites from Ephraimites is radically suspended by the possibility of referential aberration. We have no firm basis for including Rousseau, de Man, Derrida, or anyone else for that matter within any community at all, whether or not it is a question of deconstruction. “*This*,” the vague nucleus formed at Johns Hopkins in 1966, is an empty set. Two or three can never become one. Indeed one can never become one. As such, the “interrupted history” of deconstruction Derrida presents in “Acts” is truly “interrupted,” and can have no history as a

discrete entity. In consequence, the community invoked by the title of this study is unmasked. We can make an example of it but it cannot be exemplary. It is merely a rhetorical community that belies the fundamental impossibility of community. And one can only respond, watching Gileadites strike down Ephraimites in the passages of literary history, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

Must the story of the “future promise” of deconstruction end here with the assertion that it never was and never shall be a community? Must we give up hope of thinking through this *aporia* of the *shibboleth*? In other words, does posing deconstruction as a question of community merely show that all references to community overlook the ineluctable problem of reference itself?

To wholeheartedly answer “yes” to these questions, and remain in the *purgatorio* of referential aberration, would be to overlook Derrida’s most explicit statement of the “future promise” of de Man’s thought. According to “Acts,” de Man’s greatest legacy and the concomitant future promise of deconstruction is this: he shows us that the *aporia* is never the end of the story. “The word ‘aporia,’” Derrida (1986a, p.135) explains, “[...] recurs often in Paul de Man’s last texts. I believe that we would misunderstand it if we tried to hold it to its most literal meaning: an absence of path, a paralysis before roadblocks, the immobilization of thinking, the impossibility of advancing, a barrier blocking the future”. Rather, de Man demonstrates that “[...] the very oscillation of undecidability goes back and forth and weaves a text; it makes, if this is possible, a path of writing through the *aporia*.” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.135). The *aporia* may interrupt the story. But it does not end the story. Rather, it provokes a rethinking of the nature and limits of the problem at hand. It forces a “rethinking of the path” that brought us to this seeming end-point (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.132). Hence, Derrida’s “...interrupted – history” of deconstruction pauses on the “Rhetoric of Blindness” debate. But, it does not stop there. It is not clear that it ever stops at all.

At first glance, Derrida’s contribution to the “The Rhetoric of Blindness” debate ‘begins’ on page 129 of *Mémoires* and ‘ends’ on page 132 with a muted exhortation: “We should perhaps speak of this again some other time.” However, this short digression in Derrida’s text links the question of the *shibboleth* raised by the “Rhetoric of Blindness” debate to the whole of “Acts.” In fact, Derrida’s summation on page 131 hints that the enigma of the *shibboleth* distills the secret and subtle quintessence of a speech that purports to address “the enigma of a secret and subtle *Auseinandersetzung* between Heidegger and Paul de Man” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.92). Here, Derrida explicitly calls the boundaries of the previously discussed debate into question:

For in a certain way, that of which Paul de Man says ‘perhaps we can speak of this again later’ [the disagreement over Rousseau] and of which I have just said we never spoke again, in truth, is what we have never ceased writing about ever since, as if to prepare ourselves to speak of it again one day, in our very old age. All in all, a promise. (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.131).

The specter of the *shibboleth* emerges, as we have seen in the analysis of the “debate”, regardless of whether we read “The Rhetoric of Blindness” literally or rhetorically. Yet, the inexorable presence of the *shibboleth* has tricked us into literalizing the problem. As this passage from Derrida suggests, the problem raised by the debate over Rousseau, what we have here called the problem of the *shibboleth*, and not any particular *shibboleth* (e.g. the *shibboleth of rhetoric* de Man seemingly hypostasizes), is what holds him and de Man together. The *shibboleth* (as question of limits) lurks in the margins of everything they have written. They are then, at the very least, a community of two, united by no *shibboleth* but the problem of the *shibboleth* itself. With this subversion of boundaries in mind, we can begin to read the rest of “Acts” with an eye towards “rethinking the path” that brought us to the point of washing our hands of “*this*” whole thing.

Fittingly, Derrida (1986a, p.91) opens “Acts” by attempting to account for a past speech act: “I announced as you will perhaps remember, that I would speak of memory”. However, this discussion of memory quickly turns away from the question of memory and towards the implications of de Man’s appropriation of a phrase from Heidegger. Derrida references a passage that appears in the “Promises” chapter of de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*:

The redoubtable efficacy of the text [the *Social Contract*] is due to the rhetorical model of which it is a version. This model is a fact of language over which Rousseau himself has no control. Just as any other reader, he is bound to misread his text as a promise of political change. The error is not within the reader; language itself dissociates the cognition from the act. *Die Sprache verspricht (sich)*; to the extent that is necessarily misleading [sic], language just as necessarily conveys the promise of its own truth. This is also why textual allegories on this level of rhetorical complexity generate history. (DE MAN, 1979, p.277).

De Man changes Heidegger’s famous one-liner *Die Sprache spricht*, “language speaks,” to a double-liner: “language contradicts itself”/“language promises (itself).” One might well ask, echoing de Man’s appropriation of Archie Bunker in “Semiology and Rhetoric”: What’s the difference? The difference, Derrida insists, is de Man’s main concern, greatest insight, and the key to the future possibility of deconstruction as a community.

Heidegger's phrase is a "[...] taking note of the fact that language is not the governable instrument of a speaking being (or subject) and that its essence cannot appear through any other instance than that of the very language which names it, says it, gives it to be thought, speaks it." Rather, "Language speaks of and by itself" (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.96-97). De Man, like Heidegger, rejects meta-linguistic totalization. As he says in "Semiology and Rhetoric," "We end up therefore, in the case of the rhetorical grammatization of semiology, just as in the grammatical rhetorization of illocutionary phrases, in the same state of suspended ignorance." (DE MAN, 1979, p.19). Yet, Heidegger's phrase is insufficient in de Man's estimation insofar as it lends itself to privileging semiology over rhetoric, a totalized, determinate system over the "vertiginous abyss" of undecidability. As Derrida (1986a, p.97) puts it: "[...] the discreet parody which complicates *spricht* with *verspricht* suggests, on the contrary, that there is no originary and essential *Sprechen* which is then modalized into a promise." The promise is not a mode of language; it is *the* mode of language itself.

Hence, de Man's variation on Heidegger's theme insists that language can only speak (itself) in a certain way. It must speak as if it will lead to a fulfillment that never comes. Language turns as if towards truth or reference, but finding only the ineluctable stasis of "suspended ignorance," it can only turn again: "[...] without any hope of achieving the stability of a metalanguage, a metatropé, a metarhetoric..." (DE MAN, 1983, p.215). Again, again, again, but each time promising to reach the truth, each time seeming to promise something other than itself. In the end, language can only give itself. It, thus, contradicts itself in the act of promising. "This," Derrida (1986a, p.100) claims, "[...] is why Paul de Man writes: *Die Sprache verspricht (sich)*..." He adds the pronoun as that which speech must add to itself in order to speak." Language, de Man shows us, is but this promise that is also a contradiction. Or, as Derrida (1986a, p.95) puts it, "[...] the act of language is that of a performative promise whose perverse ambiguity cannot be dominated or purified, but whose very act could not be annulled." De Man's greatest insight, and the hope for the future community "deconstruction in America" is this: all language follows the logic of an contradictory promise.

"Acts" thus forces us to reevaluate, and attempt to answer on de Man's own terms ("leaving him a chance to speak") the questions that previously brought us to the point of trashing his critique of Derrida:

Q: Can the present text, or any other, make a reflexive gesture towards its own irony or rhetoricity?

A: Yes, but only as a gesture, never touching upon something that will take us beyond the reflexivity of the gesture.

Q: Can a text fail to be self-reflexive?

A: A text is nothing but its own self-reflexive promise.

Q: Can rhetoric account for rhetoric?

A: Only rhetoric can account for rhetoric.

But, where does this catechism leave us? It forces us into a self-reflexive gesture. It sends us back to one of the first passages cited above. Having situated de Man's legacy as a question of the promise, we now see Derrida's treatment of "The Rhetoric of Blindness" debate in "Acts" for what it truly is: a veiled (re)assertion of the "agreement" that de Man rejected in the letter of July 9, 1970. By blurring the boundaries between the "Rhetoric of Blindness" debate and everything else that he and de Man have ever written, Derrida makes clear that the problem of the *shibboleth* is the exact double of the promise. The logic of the *shibboleth*, "what we have never ceased writing about" (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.132), *is* the logic of the promise. For the *shibboleth*, like all language, promises. It promises substance, something other than itself, belongingness. It can only speak as such. It must speak as such. In the end, however, the *shibboleth* promises nothing but itself. It contradicts itself. To hear or not to hear the voice of the other as a voice of contradiction, the voice of a "sparring partner"... that is the question. But language itself is the site where this choice must be made: Are we legion or are we one? Thus, the ability to maintain a shared history (a friendship even) in the wake of the "most uncanny, most insane, most bizarrely interesting critical encounter imaginable" reinscribes the possibility for a community that does not depend on essential commonality, or a *shibboleth* referring to substantive difference from others. Derrida and de Man can at once agree *and* disagree, and two can (again) become one.

As such, when coupled with de Man's notion of language-as-promise, the question of the *shibboleth* returns us to literal meaning. *Its* literal meaning. The word *shibboleth* such as the Gileadites used it meant "a stream or torrent." "Acts" shows us that de Man's greatest insight is the recognition that language tosses us into an unbreakable torrent. In this stream we are not sure who is who, what is what, whether I am even I. The only hope for community – which is also the possibility for the violence enacted by community – is an event, an interruption in the uninterrupted torrent. De Man, following Rousseau, shows us that this emergence must always take the form of a foundational story or "interrupted history." The torrent is never broken. The sea is never parted. But it can seem to break or seem to part, for language promises as much as it withholds.

Community is thus recast as solidarity despite absolute difference. Community, de Man shows us, emerges as a rhetorical one in the space of literal multiplicity. Or, put otherwise, community is the literal reading of an ineluctably rhetorical promise. De Man's legacy gestures us towards Giorgio Agamben's utopian "coming

community” (*communita che viene*) composed of “[...] whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging [...]” (AGAMBEN, 1993, p.86)¹¹. Unlike Agamben, however, de Man’s gesture does not imply a redemptive *telos*. As long as there is hope for community there is hope for those who disregard de Man’s warning that “...it is substance itself that is the abyss.” (DE MAN, 1983, p. 245).

As such, the future of deconstruction as a community emerges from the passages of “Acts” tempered but unscathed. The problem of the *shibboleth* may indeed be situated above a “vertiginous abyss of the unsaid.” But, this “vertiginous abyss of the unsaid” is certainly “not always what goes without saying” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.131). For the sorrowful landscape of history is littered with the forgotten bodies of Gileadites and Ephraimites by a thousand other names. “The promise,” Derrida (1986a, p.150) warns, “[...] has meaning and gravity only on the condition of death...only with the death of the other,” only on the occasion of mourning. It is all-too-easy, all-too-human, to forget de Man’s greatest insight: language-as-promise-as-*shibboleth*. We are accustomed to living within the arbitrary conditions imposed upon the torrent, and hardly ever remember to ask, as we are tossed around by its waters, “What are we, who are we, to what and to whom *are we*, and to what and to whom are we *destined* in the experience of this impossible promise?” (DERRIDA, 1986a, p.149, emphases in text).

Accordingly, “Acts” casts “deconstruction” as *the* impossible community, a community whose *shibboleth* is a vow to endeavor to say the unsayable and ask the unaskable. “Deconstruction,” Derrida assures us, will go on as long as there are those who attempt to state, as de Man (1983, p.133) ironically states in “The Rhetoric of Blindness,” that, “The only literal statement that says what it means to say is the assertion that there can be no literal statements”. “Deconstruction in America” will go on, perhaps under a thousand different monikers, as long as there are those who attempt to ask “For what is the use of asking, I ask, when we cannot even authoritatively decide whether a question asks or doesn’t ask?” (DE MAN, 1979, p.10). And, if the author of the present study may be excused his own *petit profession de soi*, deconstruction will go on, indeed must go on, as long as there are Gileadites among us who believe that there is substance worthy of death behind any mark, sign, or letter. Which is not to say that “deconstruction” offers a vision of hope or

¹¹ Agamben’s quote ends with the assertion that this “whatever singularity...is the principle enemy of the state.” I withhold it above, precisely because the duality of the de Manian promise (of language) insists upon the difficulty of at once maintaining Agamben’s revolutionary “co-belonging” of singularities and resisting a nostalgic return to a literalized “representable condition of belonging.” In other words, the “co-belonging” of singularity is all-too-easily reinscribed as exclusive and divisive unity. De Man shows that this occurs not by virtue of the “bad faith” of the singularities involved, but by virtue of our ineluctable “being-in-language,” our existence in the torrent/*shibboleth*.

progress. Derrida – de Man – Rousseau, these three, this one, leave to us all that can ever be left, that is, a promise: “The love that moves the sun and the other stars.” [*l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle*, Dante’s *Paradiso*, Canto 33, line 145).

SPOSITO, S. Lendo o *Sibboleth*: Derrida – de Man – Rousseau. **Revista de Letras**, São Paulo, v. 49, n.2, p.207-227, jul./dez., 2009

- **RESUMO:** *Este artigo empreende uma leitura original de Acts, de Jacques Derrida, um memorial para Paul de Man que tenta responder à questão “Qual é o legado da desconstrução?” sob a perspectiva que entende a desconstrução como uma comunidade determinada, logo também como referência às repercussões da desconstrução para nossa compreensão dos limites da comunidade (o problema do shibboleth). Ao focalizar a interrupção que, em Acts, diz respeito ao debate travado em Rhetoric of Blindness entre Derrida e De Man, sobre se Rousseau deve ou não ser lido como um membro da comunidade da desconstrução avant la lettre, o presente artigo argumenta contrariamente a interpretações anteriores do debate que o entendiam nos termos de um simples antagonismo. Como Derrida deixa claro em Acts, o debate sobre se Rousseau expressa ou não um tipo de shibboleth e se qualquer texto ou ato de fala pode ou não oferecer shibboleth no que diz respeito ao uso autoconsciente de uma linguagem sempre já indeterminada, destila o problema dos limites da comunidade e das condições de possibilidade da comunidade, uma questão que deve ser necessariamente pensada em meio a qualquer discussão do legado da desconstrução.*
- **PALAVRAS CHAVE:** *Desconstrução. Comunidade. Shibboleth. Rousseau. Retórica.*

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