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BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT OF READING DECONSTRUCTION BETWEEN JACQUES DERRIDA AND PAUL DE MAN

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Abstract. This paper reexamines the complex relationship between Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man by focusing on their divergent approaches to deconstruction, particularly through readings of Rousseau's *Confessions*. While de Man emphasizes a "philological" mode of reading grounded in the text's self-deconstructive structure, Derrida interrogates the epistemological and performative distinctions underpinning de Man's approach. By analyzing Derrida's misreading of de Man's modulation between confessional modes, the paper clarifies the implications of de Man's claim regarding the undecidability between excuse and truth-statement. It concludes that de Man's "thinking of the law" makes a decisive contribution to the ethico-political trajectory of Derrida's deconstruction in his later works.

Keywords: Derrida; Paul de Man; deconstruction; Rousseau; excuse; blindness of reading

1. No Pure Self-deconstruction

In an interview with Stefano Rosso in 1983 that was included as the final chapter of *Resistance to Theory*, Paul de Man described his own position as "different" from Jacques Derrida's:

> The difference is that Derrida's text is so brilliant, so incisive, so strong that whatever happens in Derrida, it happens between him and his own text. He doesn't need Rousseau, he doesn't need anybody else; I do need them very badly because I never had an idea of my own, it was always through a text, through the critical examination of a text… (de Man 1986, p. 118)

Whenever de Man is mentioned as a leading figure in "deconstructive criticism," his relationship to Derrida – , an epicenter of the deconstruction movement – has always been problematic. Derrida's term "deconstruction" is a French translation of Heidegger's "*Destruktion*" or "*Abbau*," but Derrida's thought could never remain a follower of Heidegger. Similarly, de Manian deconstruction has a complex and ambivalent relationship with Derrida's work, making it more than a mere import or

imitation of Derrida's thought in the English-speaking world. Indeed, the passage from de Man just quoted is particularly revealing, as it highlights the "differences" rather than the similarities between himself and Derrida.

At first glance, this passage appears to be an expression of modesty, as it praises the "so brilliant, so incisive, so strong" nature of Derrida's work while seemingly downplaying de Man's own singularity. However, in his critique of Derrida in "The Rhetoric of Blindness" (de Man 1983, pp. 102 – 141), de Man's key argument is that Derrida's approach, to the extent that it projects pre-existing ideas onto Rousseau, remains an extrinsic "philosophical intervention." In other words, Derrida's reading of Rousseau lacks sufficient immanence, while implying that de Man positions himself as a more radically intrinsic reader, a *philologist*. In the same passage, de Man states the following:

> I assume, as a working hypothesis (as a working hypothesis, because I know better than that), that the text knows in an absolute way what it's doing. This is not the case, but it is a necessary working hypothesis that Rousseau knows at any time what he is doing and, as such, there is no need to deconstruct. In a complicated way, I would hold to that statement that "the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive" rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from the outside of the text. (De Man 1986, p. 118)

From this point of view, as is well-known, de Man criticised Derrida's reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. By mistaking Rousseau for his interpreters, Derrida found in Rousseau's text the "metaphysics of presence" to be deconstructed. However, the insights that enable such a deconstruction are inscribed in Rousseau's texts themselves. In other words, Rousseau's texts have already deconstructed themselves, to the extent that there is no need to deconstruct Rousseau externally (de Man 1983, pp. 139 – 140).

De Man refers to this as the self-deconstruction of the text, made possible through a philologist's reading, as it remains intrinsic to the text itself. In contrast, as a philosopher, Derrida imposes his own conception of deconstruction onto the text from the outside. De Man critiques Derrida from his perspective of self-deconstruction, arguing for a more intrinsic and textually faithful approach.

However, de Man states that self-deconstruction is merely a working hypothesis, acknowledging that "I know better than that" and "this is not the case," and that "this hypothesis is actually wrong." This implies that no purely intrinsic position exists within the text, even if it is assumed to be self-deconstructed. It is impossible to read a text without bringing in any presuppositions, such as linguistic knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and various contexts that surround the text. Therefore, pure self-deconstruction was never feasible from the outset. However, even when a text is read through an external philosophical intervention, there is not entirely external position in relation to the text itself. Any reading process inevitably engages with the text as such.

In a lengthy essay on de Man, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) ," written 15 years later after de Man's death, Derrida responded to de Man's earlier statement that "[Derrida] doesn't need Rousseau, he doesn't need anybody else." Derrida states the following:

> As you have seen quite well, this is of course not true. De Man was wrong. I needed Paul de Man. But I needed him no doubt in order to show in my turn, many years later, that he, Paul de Man, perhaps had no need of Rousseau in order to show and to demonstrate, himself, what he thought he ought to confide in us. (Derrida 2001b, p. 146; 2001a, pp. 358 – 359.)

What Derrida was emphasising here is precisely that "de Man was wrong" and that Derrida himself needed both Rousseau and de Man. This is because it is impossible for de Man, as a philologist, to completely avoid external presuppositions in his reading. Conversely, it is precisely in this that de Man's singularity or uniqueness emerges – his text itself is "so brilliant, so incisive, so strong." This singularity is so prominent that de Man no longer needs Rousseau—a brilliant homage by Derrida, who playfully twists de Man's words that had an ironic tone.

Nevertheless, it is impossible not to read a subtle "confrontation" between Derrida and de Man in that interview, given de Man's self-definition of himself as a "philologist." After examining Derrida's reading of de Man 15 years after his death, it is evident that de Man is essential not as a philosopher but as a philologist, namely, his singularity, which is all the more outstanding because his reading tries to be intrinsic to the text. However, Derrida's misinterpretation of de Man is important here.

2. Derrida's Criticism of de Man?

Derrida's remarks mentioned earlier are from the concluding passage of the lecture "Typewriter Ribbon." This lecture contains surprisingly harsh criticisms and, as Andrzej Warminski notes, "a certain carping, needling, nit-picking, almost petty quality." (Warminski 2009, p. 1976.) Derrida's argument is somewhat perplexing for de Man's readers.

Let me briefly list the major critical points that Derrida made against de Man, which are immediately apparent. First, de Man's lack of historical consideration of Augustine and the Christian concept of confession when discussing Rousseau's *Confessions* (Derrida 2001b, p. 43; 2001a, p. 285). Second, de Man's overly hasty rejection of the possibility of substituting Marion for Madame de Vercellis, Rousseau's childhood employer (Derrida 2001b, pp. 57, 58; 2001a, pp. 296, 297). Third, de Man's simplistic interpretation of the "purloined ribbon" in Rousseau's confessional episode as a purely free signifier, akin to Lacan's "purloined letter" (Derrida 2001b, p. 87; 2001a, p. 316). Fourth, de Man's omission of the phrase "quite old [*déjà vieux*]" in the passage he quotes— "a little pink and silver-colored ribbon, which was quite old [*un petit ruban de couleur de rose et argent déjà vieux*]"

(Derrida 2001b, pp. 88 – 89; 2001a, p. 317) – or his failure to interpret "ribbons" as typewriter ink ribbons, as Derrida did (Derrida 2001b, pp. 95 – 96; 2001a, p. 323). Fifth, de Man's mistranslation of the expletive "ne" (Derrida 2001b, pp. 116 – 119; 2001a, p. 338).

Although we will not retrace each of them in detail here, it is safe to say that Derrida's points are valid, and all of them are useful. However, they are all merely points to which one should express reservations, i.e., points that can be corrected in terms of de Man's own argument, such as simple careless errors, an unclear writing style, and points that could have been restated in a more appropriate way if there had been more space. All of these are useful in the sense that they have suggestive or supplementary value, but there is nothing more than that.

Undoubtedly, the question should have been developed from Derrida's own problematics. However, as we will see below, the criticisms are not so essential as Derrida's harsh tone in terms of the argument de Man's reading sets forth.

Among the criticisms that Derrida directs toward de Man, one will notice the issue that Derrida repeatedly emphasises and questions. Derrida says: "the criterion by which de Man distinguishes confession from excuse, as well as an epistemic moment from an apologetic moment, seems to me problematic" (Derrida 2001b, p. 120; 2001a, p. 340). I focus on this issue to clarify the problems with Derrida's critique of de Man.

To address this, we must recall de Man's discussion of Rousseau's *Confessions* (de Man 1979, pp. 278–301) and the famous autobiographical episode of Rousseau's discussion. That is, Marion and the "purloined ribbon" episode. For convenience, here is a brief outline of the episode.

Rousseau, at the age of sixteen, stole "a little pink and silver-colored ribbon, which was quite old" from the house of Madame de Vercellis after she passed away, where he was employed. The theft was soon discovered, and he was questioned about it. In an attempt to avoid blame, he lied and claimed that Marion, the daughter of a servant like himself, had given it to him. He falsely implicated her, despite her tearful pleas of innocence. With "diabolical audacity," Rousseau persisted in his accusation, thereby stigmatizing Marion. She, "gentle as an angel," did not even curse him in response. Ultimately, both were forced to leave, and Rousseau's impulsive lie turned from an act of self-defense into an irreparable slander that ruined Marion's life. According to *Confessions*, Rousseau remained tormented by the remorse of this crime for the rest of his life (Rousseau 1959, pp. 84 – 87; 1953, pp. 86 – 89).

How de Man read this episode will be examined later. First, with Rousseau's story in mind, let us examine Derrida's criticism and de Man's text.

De Man frames his argument by making one fundamental distinction about what Rousseau calls confession: "confession as truth statement" and "confession as excuse."

When one has committed a crime or wrongdoing, he or she wishes to deny or conceal it out of fear, often even resorting to lying. Confession is the act of reveal-

ing all the facts, usually in the name of God, in Rousseau's case, before the public known as "the reader," to the light of day. To present the facts of such a crime as they are, it is a confession as a truth statement.

However, when the act of persuading the other person for the purpose of exoneration precedes the disclosure of the truth—meaning that persuasion is employed solely to make the other person believe the content of the confession and grant exoneration, regardless of the actual truth—this constitutes a "confession as excuse."

Derrida refutes de Man's distinction between "confession as truth statement" and "confession as excuse" as follows:

> The distinction proposed by de Man is useful but also problematic. For if there is indeed an allegation of truth to be revealed, to be made known, thus a gesture of the theoretical type, a cognitive or, as de Man says, epistemological dimension in the confession, the confession is not a confession or avowal except to the extent that it in no case allows itself to be determined by this dimension, reduced to it, or even analyzed into two dissociable elements (the one de Man calls the cognitive and the other, the apologetic). *To make* known does not come down to knowing and, above all, to make known a *fault* does not come down to making known anything whatsoever; it is *already* to accuse oneself and to engage in a performative process of excuse and forgiveness. (Derrida 2001b, pp. 78 – 79; 2001a, p. 310)

Since subtle differences in the discussion are being questioned, we should carefully check the arguments. First of all, Derrida does not deny the existence of an epistemological dimension in confessions. Therefore, he acknowledged that confessions have two aspects: epistemological and performative dimensions. However, Derrida criticises de Man because he thinks that confession cannot be understood only in terms of the former epistemological dimension; that is, confession cannot be reduced to its epistemological function of conveying the truth, and that in any case, it always involves a performative dimension.

According to Derrida, de Man regards confession as only epistemologically possible, that is, as if it could only be made in a way that allows for truth or falsehood. This is wrong. No confession can be completed in the function of verifying what is referred to. It involves accusing oneself and engaging in a process of excuses and forgiveness (Derrida 2001b, p. 79; 2001a, p. 310). From the outset, every confession has a performative dimension, which is the central argument of Derrida's critique. Are Derrida's remarks fundamental critiques of de Man's arguments?

3. Derrida's Reading and Misreading of de Man's Text

The point of de Man's argument, however, is not to assign this dichotomy of confession to epistemological confession or to performative confession. It is also not meant to maintain or adhere to a hierarchy. The main point here is that, once the functions of confession are thus distinguished in the two phases, "it does not only function as a verifiable referential cognition, but it also functions as a

[performative] statement whose reliability cannot be verified by empirical means. The convergence of the two modes is not *a priori* given" (de Man 1979, p. 281).

De Man's argument aims to address the instability of this distinction. This is because the two phases of confession cannot be determined as one of the two types of confession, and this indeterminacy invites further crimes. This seems clear from the following passage by de Man.

> The interest of Rousseau's text is that it explicitly functions performatively as well as cognitively and thus gives indications about the structure of performative rhetoric; this is already established in this text when the confession fails to close off a discourse which feels compelled to *modulate* from the confessional into the apologetic mode (de Man 1979, p. 281. Emphasis mine).

Derrida's comments on this passage are as follows:

> Yes, but I wonder if the confessional mode is not *already*, always, an apologetic mode. In truth, I believe there are not here two dissociable modes and two different times, which create the possibility of modulating [*passer*] from the one to the other. I don't believe even that what de Man names "the interest of Rousseau's text," therefore its originality, consists in having to modulate [*passer*] from the confessional mode to apologetic mode. Every confessional text is already apologetic, every avowal begins by offering apologies or by excusing itself (Derrida 2001b, p. 81; 2001a, p. 312; [*passer*] indicates the French translation cited by Derrida – see de Man 1989, p. 338).

Why did Derrida interpret de Man as treating the two modes of confession as separate and as involving a "transition" from one to the other? Although the English translation restores Derrida's French back into de Man's original English—thereby obscuring the inadequacy of the translation – Derrida's misreading arises from his reliance on the French translation of *Allegory of Reading*. Why did Derrida assume that de Man regarded the two forms of confession as separate and as "passing" from one to the other? The key issue lies in the translation: de Man's original term, "modulate," is rendered as "*passer*" in the French translation. While "modulate" in English might bear some resemblance to the French "*passer*", the difference between the two is significant and cannot be overlooked.

The word "*passer*" means simply "to pass" or "to move" from one to the other of two separate and distinct states. However, to modulate means "to change the tone" from one to the other – to shift the main phase of confession, that is, the emphasis from the confessional aspect of truth statement to the apologetic aspect (as an excuse) of what was originally the one and same confession.

In short, this sentence by de Man is describing the modulation or tone change of the dominant aspect from one mode to the other, not one of describing a mere "passing" or transition between separate alternatives: one or the other. Derrida accuses de Man relying on an inaccurate French translation.

Derrida seems to have been too hasty in emphasising the difference between de Man's interpretation and his own, so as to attribute to de Man a "mistake" that

he did not actually commit. De Man introduced this distinction by acknowledging that every confession has its own modes of distinction. Nevertheless, Derrida repeatedly raises this point, dismisses de Man's argument as "false," and attempts to refute it.

Why did Derrida not read de Man's text in a direction closer to his argument? Why did Derrida try to reject de Man's argument excessively? Derrida holds that "every confessional text is by definition already apologetic, every avowal begins by offering apologies, by excusing oneself" (Derrida 2001b, p. 81; 2001a, p. 312). De Man agrees with this assertion.

It is true that there are certain inadequacies in de Man's argument because of the lack of explanation and ambiguity of expression. There is no denying that Derrida's points are instructive. Nevertheless, there is a misreading by Derrida that could be regarded as inappropriate because of such didactic gestures. This belongs to the philosopher Derrida, who was not sufficiently intrinsic to the text of the philologist de Man. It is as if, just as Rousseau was misread by his readers and had to repeat his points repeatedly, de Man, Rousseau's reader, was misread even after his death by one of his best friends and had to be involved in further endless debate. In this sense, the "blindness and insight" of reading around Rousseau between Derrida and de Man continues for us, their readers.

4. Self-Exposure as Confession

De Man's argument is that a confession, which should be a statement of truth, must always be transformed into a confession as an excuse, placing it in an undecidable relationship between a truth-statement and an excuse. Certainly, a confession requires reference to facts and depends on a (constative) statement of truth. Even if a confession fails at becoming an excuse, the excuse itself is not possible unless it attempts to appeal to the value of truth. In other words, the confession must be disguised as a confession of utter fact, even if it actually functions as a "confession as an excuse."

According to de Man, this duality or nonconvergence, torn between confession and excuse, triggers further crimes to be excused. In other words, the more one confesses, the more one makes excuses, and the more one makes excuses, the more one produces more crimes, and the more one has to make excuses for those crimes. What happens then?

We must read the relevant passages in *Confessions*. The first concerns the dimension of truth. Rousseau emphasised that the purpose is not to excuse his mistakes but to reveal the truth as it is. "I have been absolutely frank in the account I have just given," Rousseau stated. "No one will accuse me, I am certain, of palliating the heinousness of my offence. But I should not fulfil the aim of this book if I did not at the same time reveal my inner feelings and hesitated to put up such excuses for myself as I honestly could" (Rousseau 1959, p. 86; 1953, p. 88).

Rousseau stole the ribbon in favour of Marion. The ribbon is a symbolic signifier of the desire to possess her. Moreover, as de Man clarifies, the ribbon represents the symmetrical reciprocity between Rousseau and Marion. The ribbon becomes a signifier of "substitutability," "Rousseau desires Marion as Marion desires Rousseau" (de Man 1979, p. 283). That is, the "condition of love" for Rousseau.

Although Rousseau stole the ribbon out of love for Marion, when questioned, he utters her name. When he is questioned in "the presence of all those people," he is so ashamed that he tries to frame Marion as the culprit. He was not afraid of punishment but only of shame. "But that I feared more than death, more than crime, more than anything in the world," Rousseau writes. "I should have rejoiced if the earth had swallowed me up and stifled me in the abyss. But my invincible sense of shame prevailed over everything. It was my shame that made me impudent, and the more wickedly I behaved the bolder my fear of confession made me" (Rousseau 1959, p. 86; 1953, p. 88).

As de Man repeatedly reminds us, in spite of the fact that Rousseau strongly seeks to make himself "never have to speak of [Marion's episode] again" at the end of the second volume of his *Confessions*, he is forced to take up the subject again later, about ten years after writing the second part of his *Confessions*, in the "Fourth Reverie" of the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1777). The crime of stealing the ribbon, the crime of slandering Marion, and the crime of self-exposure flaunt such crimes while professing shame. "The excuse is a ruse which permits exposure in the name of hiding" (de Man 1979, p. 286). In fact, the ruse of Rousseau's excuses made Marion the object of humiliation by his shameless exposure for posterity, in short, for all those who read Rousseau's *Confessions*. From this perspective, by focusing on Rousseau's desire for self-exposure, the initial reasons for Rousseau's excuses, such as his love for Marion, became quite dubious.

Rousseau's excuses continue. Does the text of *Confessions* not offer endless possibilities for making excuses (excusabilities), even against the "intentions" of the later Rousseau—intentions that are themselves highly suspect—and beyond the crimes of self-exposure we have already examined? This is de Man's final question.[1]

The problem lies in the following sentence from the decisive passage of *Confessions*, which I have already mentioned:

> Never was deliberate wickedness further from my intention than at that cruel moment. When I accused that poor girl, it is strange but true that my friendship for her was the cause. She was present in my thoughts, and I threw the blame on the first object that occurred to me. [*je m'excusai sur le premier objet qui s'offrit*.] (Rousseau 1959, p. 86; 1953, p. 88.)

As we have already seen, the point of this passage is that Rousseau could not help but mention Marion's name, because he was always thinking of her out of his affection for her. However, de Man points out that this does *not* exhaust our understanding of the passage.

> … the use of a vocabulary of contingency ("*le premier objet qui s'offrit*") within an argument of causality is arresting and disruptive, for the sentence is phrased in such a way as to allow for a complete disjunction between Rousseau's desires and interests and the selection of this particular name. Marion just happened to be the first thing that came to mind; any other name, any other word, any other sound or noise could have done just as well and Marion's entry into the discourse is a mere effect of chance. (de Man, p. 288)

In other words, according to de Man's more detailed reading, if Jean-Jacques's friendship with Marion was the only cause, then there would have been no need to mention her name as a result of sheer coincidence, or at least this coincidence could have led to a disruption that could not be resolved by simply subordinating it to the argument of causality. In this passage, the phrase "the first object that occurred to me" (*le premier objet qui s'offrit*) sounds like an uncanny phrase as if the name "Marion" started moving around on its own, and it came to Rousseau's mind without any intention or desire on his part. If we take the coincidence of this action of mentioning her name on the spur of the moment as literally as possible, then Rousseau's excuse must be considered as a possibility rather than understanding it based on affection or desire.

De Man's focus is on excessive wording that, at first glance, does not seem to fit neatly into the given context and that it retains a certain clumsiness. Such "excessiveness" is an element that opens up alternative possibilities beyond the given context. De Man called this an "anacoluthon" and saw the potential to read it literally as *excess itself*, without dismissing it as a mistake caused by the author's lack of skill or carelessness.

If this is the case, then the possibility of such a coincidence can only be described as a momentary "madness" (de Man 1979, p. 289) – Rousseau himself uses the term "*délire*" (Rousseau 1959, p. 1025), – "total arbitrariness", or "randomness" (de Man 1979, pp. 289, 291), as in the case of the phrase "the devil made me do it." Then, it would open the ultimate possibility of making excuses endlessly, in the sense that it goes beyond even what Rousseau himself intended, as a "the almost imperceptible crack of the purely gratuitous" (de Man 1979, p. 291) in the *Confessions*, in which he repeatedly professed that he would reveal the truth. De Man stated the following:

> In the spirit of the text, one should resist all temptation to give any significance whatever to the sound "Marion." For it is only if the act that initiated the entire chain, the utterance of the sound "Marion," is truly without any conceivable motive that the total arbitrariness of the action becomes the most effective, the most efficaciously performative excuse of all. The estrangement between subject and utterance is then so radical that it escapes any mode of comprehension. When everything else fails, one can always plead insanity (de Man 1979, p. 289).

5. The Literary as the Site of Madness

De Man's reading of *Confessions* given above indicates the site of madness that de Man found in Rousseau's concept of making excuses or excusability. When considering the relationship between de Man and Derrida, it is necessary to recall that such a "madness" was in fact one of the most essential elements for de Man, defining the blindness and insight of literature.

For de Man, a "literary" text "implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature; that is, of its 'rhetoricity.'" (de Man 1983, p. 136). However, it is a non-blind text that does not need to be deconstructed because of "knowing" its own rhetoricity in a certain way. Alternatively, "literature remains persistently open to being misunderstood for doing the opposite" (de Man 1983, p. 138) because "the text also postulates the necessity of its own misreading" (de Man 1983, p. 136). Indeed, de Man is forced to hold that even if one interprets literature in this way, it "will, in its turn, be caught in its own form of blindness" (de Man 1983, p. 139).

This is made even clearer by reading de Man's letter to Derrida (dated January 4, 1971).

> There is no disagreement between us about the basis of your thinking but a certain divergence in our way of nuancing and situating Rousseau. This divergence is important to me for the notions that I had come to about the question of writing before having had the benefit of your thinking, above all, they were drawn from Rousseau (and Hölderlin) . . . The desire to exempt Rousseau (as you say) *at all costs* from blindness is therefore, for me, a gesture of fidelity to my own itinerary . . . This having been said, I did not wish to exempt Rousseau from blindness but only wished to show that, on the specific question of the rhetoricity of his writing, he was not blinded. This is what gives to his text the particular status that we would both agree, I believe, to call "literary." That this insight is accompanied by a perhaps more redoubtable blindness—and which could be, for example, madness—I didn't feel myself obliged to say about this latter text [*Essay on the Origin of Languages*], but I would say it in regard to the *Dialogues* and especially in regard to *Emile*, which seems to me one of the most demented texts there is. (Derrida 1989a, p. 130)

Rousseau is *literary*, and in spite of, rather than because of, his non-blindness, he embraces "a perhaps more redoubtable blindness." To keep "a gesture of fidelity to my own itinerary" de Man also has to share with Rousseau a further blindness in adhering to Rousseau's literary non-blindness. It is the *blindness of insight* that one must inevitably fall into by being completely lucid in the face of blindness.

Although de Man was not unaware of such a return of blindness, he could never actively assert his own blindness as far as he criticised Derrida by stating that "Rousseau is literary." This is because to make this blindness explicit would destroy the very statement "literary," and one would thus have to reject the very use of the word "literary." It would ultimately be to become "literary" oneself. Therefore, it was necessary to throw oneself into *total blindness*.

De Man paraphrases this by the word "madness." Such a site of madness is also found, as we have seen earlier, in de Man's reading of the *Confessions*. But whether he is discussing *Essay on the Origin of Language*, *Dialogues*, or *Emile*, de Man's own text, in the end, is not far from being "literary" when he deals with such a thing about Rousseau. De Man is neither Rousseau nor is he trying to be. What de Man describes is the "literary" thing as impossible in itself, that is, as "renunciation" (Mizumura 1985). He tries to clarify it as much as possible that a literary text "knows and asserts that it will be misunderstood. It tells the story, the allegory of its misunderstanding" (de Man 1983, p. 136).

6. From Reading of Blindness to "Thinking of the Law"

To conclude, despite Derrida's misreading and blindness to de Man's texts, I would like to explore what constitutes the singularity and uniqueness of de Man – especially in light of Derrida statement that he "needed de Man" (Derrida 2001b, p. 146; 2001a, p. 358). Furthermore, I wish to consider why we, too, might "need de Man," without necessarily relying on Derrida's emphasis of reading de Man.

De Man's death in 1983 marked a decisive turning point in the context of deconstruction. The following year, in a series of lectures in the United States, Derrida attempted a reading of de Man's work that was later published in a book titled *Mémoires*. It expressed Derrida's debt to de Man in a surprisingly straightforward manner. Derrida states that "never has any appeared to me as generous in its rigor, as free of all reactiveness, as respectful of the future without ever giving way to complaisance, never has any criticism appeared to me so easy to accept as that of Paul de Man in 'The Rhetoric of Blindness'" (Derrida 1989a, p. 126).

At the beginning of the lecture, Derrida points out from de Man's criticism of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin what he calls "thinking of the law."

> The impossibility of reducing a thinking of the law to a thinking of Being, and the impossibility of naming without in some way appealing to the order of the law. As early as 1955, this is what Paul de Man felt he had to oppose to a certain Heideggerian reading of Hölderlin. This thinking of the law was always, with Paul de Man, a rigorous, enigmatic, paradoxical, and vigilant one. And I believe that this thinking runs through all his work, like a fidelity that was also a fidelity to Hölderlin. One can find signs of this in the altogether original meditations on the contact, the promise, and the juridical or political performative which are also readings of Rousseau and Nietzsche in *Allegories of Reading*. (Derrida 1989a, p. 8)

One of de Man's major achievements, which led Derrida to state that "he needed de Man," can be understood through de Man's "thinking of the law." This concept had a decisive scope, potentially shaping Derrida's thematic inclinations from the mid-1980s onwards and influencing the subsequent development of deconstruction. It is only by examining this "thinking of the law" that the possibilities of what has hastily been called the "ethico-political turn" of deconstruction can be fully understood.

Although Derrida himself explicitly denies the political or ethical turn of deconstruction[2], an important source of the ethico-political development of deconstruction is not necessarily found in Derrida's own thinking. It is in de Man's thinking about law that we can locate it. This "thinking of the law" of de Man would reveal the ethico-political implications of deconstructive reading, or rather what is at stake of the "ethico-political" for textual reading in general.

In short, the encounter between the texts of Derrida and de Man, mediated through this "thinking of the law," points to a crucial *topos* that defines the very centre of deconstruction's possibility. Tracing the trajectory of this in-between space will reveal the configuration that is determining the "future of deconstruction." As a program of re-reading, this prospect enables us to approach their texts anew – 20 years after Derrida's death and nearly 40 years after de Man's – offering our insights into their enduring significance.[3]

NOTES

1. The fact that there is still no end to the discourses that support historical revisionism surrounding the Holocaust and other war crimes can be explained by this very possibility of making excuses. However, the possibility of making excuses means that it opens up the possibility of being absolved of any crime, but at the same time it also means the structural inevitability of having to bear the burden of guilt once again. Ultimately, decisions about the weight of a crime or its significance cannot be derived from principles. They can only be made through the process of actually analyzing the materials or reading the text, while giving due consideration to the relative stability of the context in each case. In this sense, Carlo Ginzburg's judgment that de Man's reading of Rousseau's *Confessions* is "Rousseau's absolution in Nietzsche's name" and "self-absolution" for de Man's own "intolerable past" remains unilateral and partial, and he is not aware that his own gesture repeats the further crime of making excuses that Rousseau-de Man has revealed (Ginzburg 2000, p. 40). I would like to emphasize that it was Derrida's achievement to approach the complexity and difficulty of the "crime" committed by the young de Man in the most thorough and delicate way. (Cf. Derrida 1989a, pp. 147 – 232; 1989b, pp. 812 – 873.)
2. Cf. "There never was in the 1980s or 1990s, as has sometimes been claimed, a *political turn* or *ethical turn* in 'deconstruction,' at least not as I experience it" (Derrida 2005, p. 39).
3. The deconstructive approach to text and law, as well as literature and law, was pioneered by writers contemporaneous with Derrida and de Man. See, among others, the works of Barbara Johnson (Johnson 1980). The early works of Geoffrey Bennington, well known for his study of Derrida, are also deeply involved in the exploration of the *topos* of such questions (Bennington 1986).

In the 1990s, this discourse expanded in response to historical revisionism and trauma studies, particularly in the works of Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth (Felman 2001; Caruth 1996).

Given the above, we must now consider the current media landscape, which has been radically reshaped by e-books, digital texts, and the expanding role of LLMs and AI in processing digital data. These changes have transformed the distribution of literary text via the Internet, altered the state of libraries and archives, and redefined the very conditions of reading. Under these conditions, the relationship of text and law requires fundamental reexamination. In my recent book, I attempt to explore new conditions for the humanities through an examination of Lev Manovich's argument in his *The Language of New Media* (cf. Miyazaki 2024, pp. 203 – 215).

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