Performativity and Obligation

J. Hillis Miller has undoubtedly been one of Derrida’s most attentive and inventive readers from the first moments of the impact of his work in the United States. The tribute to de Man, discussed in the previous chapter (Miller 1985), nevertheless illustrates one of the central difficulties of extracting Derrida’s core statements, such as those on the absence of signatory and referent, from their contexts. Aside from the ubiquitous terminology of presence and absence itself, Derrida’s work is full of emblems and metaphors that represent these absences. The ‘sun’ is one such emblem, but ‘Writing’ and ‘Arche-writing’ in *Of Grammatology* are no less metaphorical in the way they represent the absence of the person who means or refers. This does not mean that signifying subjects or external objects, people and things, melt into air. The post card and the gramophone are among many emblems of absence, like the signature and telecommunications in general that come to stand in for this key characteristic of writing as language founded on absence.

In the United States, the misunderstanding of the question of absence, and the more general issue of deconstruction and the philosophy of language, was often focused on speech act theory, which was not only a major common interest for Derrida and de Man, but also the most direct point of contact between Derrida’s work and the Anglo-American critical tradition. This double relevance of speech act theory for the relation of Derrida to de Man and for the broader question of American criticism makes it an intriguing topic. Gasché and others (Gasché 1981; Derrida 1986) have emphasized the use of terminology derived from speech act theory as the distinctive characteristic of de Manian deconstruction. It is particularly interesting to look at this aspect of de Man’s work in the light of the discussion of metaphor, both because Derrida’s treatment of the two areas is so similar, and because in *Allegories of Reading*
speech act terminology is so closely interwoven with that of rhetorical and figural categories. Speech act theory also represents a paradigm as close to structuralism as can be found in the American tradition, and one that is openly challenged by Derrida and de Man. The exchange between Derrida and Searle is the most celebrated episode in this confrontation.

Whereas in ‘White Mythology’ the sun is an emblem that evokes absence of a sensory referent, in ‘Signature, Event, Context’ Derrida turns his attention to emblematic representations of the absence of the signatory. These are fundamentally the twin absences of signatory and referent described in Of Grammatology: ‘Let us…come back to the absence of the referent…and therefore the correlative intention of signification.’ For this reason, we would expect Derrida to repeat and continue the claims of ‘White Mythology’ in ‘Signature, Event, Context’. We might say, of these two absences, that the referent stands to reference as the signifying intention stands to communication, and this helps to clarify the ways in which ‘a certain construal’ of communication can be understood as the target of ‘Signature, Event, Context’.

The exchange between Derrida and Searle has been the context on which many understandings of deconstruction, and its approach to the theory of language, have been based. Commentators are generally agreed that Searle misunderstood Derrida’s position, and though they have illustrated and restated that there is a gap between them, few have offered a satisfactory account of the nature of the misunderstanding. Culler explains Searle’s ‘egregious misunderstanding’ of Derrida as a failure to explore the problems that Derrida raises in ‘Signature, Event, Context’. Instead Searle uses his essay ‘dogmatically to reaffirm the structure in question’. Culler spends many pages himself reaffirming the gap between the two writers without really analysing it. In her review of ‘Limited Inc’ Spivak views the exchange as the humiliation of Searle by Derrida – ‘Derrida exposes Searle’s critique to be off the mark in every way’ – and lists the ways in which Derrida refutes Searle. Again this amounts to little more than the restatement of their separate intellectual grounds. Norris addresses the issue in five separate works. In each case the analysis views the exchange as a meeting of commonsense reason in the tradition of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and what he calls the ‘French line of high metaphysical abstraction’. Again there is some kind of unclosable gap between the two, principally because Derrida’s intent ‘was to baffle and provoke rather than reach any common ground of discussion’; but Norris argues that the confrontation between the ludic and the serious philosophical styles is the most direct