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Shibboleth: Judges, Derrida, Celan. By Marc Redfield.

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If one wishes to access the works that have cited *Shibboleth* since its publication, one needs to pass the "Shibboleth authentication" of Project Muse. If the "Shibboleth authentication" is "successful" and one is "recognized as a member of 'X University'", then one's access to the content searched is supposed to be secured. However, as it happens, there is, in fact, no access. To pass the Shibboleth test, is sufficient to count as a member of the (academic) community, but is *not* sufficient to possess the right to have rights—the right to access knowledge. One can be "almost the same, but not quite".[1] Although this is *not* exactly Redfield's point, *Shibboleth* can still be read as a commentary on "belonging" and its political implications; on how "belonging" is instituted and potentially undone at once.

Inspired by Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida, Marc Redfield's *Shibboleth: Judges, Derrida, Celan* (2020) gives a subtle and thorough re-reading of the "shibboleth" test.

Redfield's launching pad is Chapter 12 of the Book of Judges when the Gileadites prevented the Ephraimites from crossing the Jordan River. They asked them to pronounce the word *shibboleth* (meaning in ancient Hebrew "ear of grain" or "stream"), knowing that the Ephraimites would be unable to pronounce the initial sound "sh" (the *shin* phoneme), and would say "s" *(samekh)* instead. (The Biblical text could only reproduce the misspelling by miswriting.) Eventually, 42,000 Ephraimites failed the test and were immediately killed. According to Redfield, the sheer number of victims suggests a "mass murder on a nearly genocidal scale" (p. 11) at the origins of Judeo–Christian history.

Supplementing Derrida's writings on sovereignty, particularly Paul Celan, Redfield's focus is on the performative power of the shibboleth. The first half of the

1 Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man."

book describes how shibboleth sovereignly produces a difference between self and other and how identities contingent upon the shibboleth test become undermined by the iterability and the possible failure of the test, which thus undermines the idea of sovereignty itself. In the second half of the book, through re-reading Celan, Redfield comments upon how shibboleth, rather than violently performing the biopolitical inscription of nationalist or racist exclusion, can also become a slogan that creates cosmopolitan communities open to the possibility of the event, any event to arrive, and to an encounter with the other.

By analogy to the faultiness of the written sign in representing two sounds at once, Redfield first discloses the always already flawed character of the sovereignty of the Gileadites: when Jephthah, the leader of Gileadites, the son of "a harlot", was "bargaining for sovereignty," he demanded the right to offer, as a sacrifice to God, whoever comes first to meet him after the glorious battle; the first one turned out to be his daughter. Redfield interprets the child sacrifice, the first broken and later extinct genealogical line, as an autoimmune disorder already ravaging the patriarchal order.

The Ephramites and the Gileadites are two closely related tribes: they speak the same language, just not quite. Hence, the performative force of the shibboleth. It produces the very difference it marks. The mispronunciation of a word (without semantic content and referential function), of a sound, indeed, of a noise, cannot serve as a stable guarantee for the unstable distinction between self and other, but instead *institutes* the friend-enemy binary, thereby opening what Carl Schmitt calls "the political". When deciding who is to let live and who is to kill, the friend-enemy distinction equally becomes a biopolitical inscription from and on the body (the Ephraimites knew *that* they had to pronounce the right sound; they just *could not* pronounce it). Naturally, the difference thus instituted through the performative may succeed or fail: there might be Ephraimites who *can* utter shibboleth, just like Gileadites who cannot speak it—one cannot *own* a language, as Redfield argues via Derrida; language is always more-than-one.

Next, Redfield revisits Celan's poetry, as if Derrida's text on Celan was also a shibboleth open to repetition and otherness, a future anteriority to come. He particularly focuses on Derrida's elaboration of Celan's Büchner Prize acceptance speech in *Der Meridian* to show how a date, 20th January (both the date of the Wannsee Conference in 1942 and the date Büchner's Lenz "went through the mountains") figures as a Janus-faced double: both passage and exclusion (extermination). Celan starts writing on 20th January, and his writing itself is the experience of a date, where experience is understood, via Jean-Luc Nancy, as a "crossing through danger", or a date from which and toward which the "I" writes itself. The date is singular and unrepeatable; it is there to testify, but also, as Derrida has equally shown, iterable,

read, and effacing itself before another date; it is both always already irretrievably lost, and commemorating, serving as a witness.

Redfield offers the story of Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* as a commentary on how a date can encrypt and efface a revolution (the Haitian Revolution of "slaves"), pointing to the shibboleth of race, which he already evoked in the biblical context: the shibboleth institutes difference between "us" and "them". As expected, he also connects race and date to the act of circumcision as the biopolitical inscription *par excellence,* which is, at the same time, always already figurative, always there to be read. Shibboleth, therefore, opens up an agonistic political, and biopolitical space, actualizing both the sovereign decision and the iterable technicity of policing and surveillance, that is always already "viral".

In the second half of the book, Redfield reads Celan's poem entitled "Schibboleth" and "In eins" to argue that shibboleth may also be read as a slogan, transmitted like a symbolon, providing many possible referents in more than one language, opening to whatever and whoever arrives. It evokes the date "February," pointing to various historical events, appearing in a Benjaminian constellation: the Austrian Civil War of 1934, the crushed demonstration in Paris in 1962 against the Algerian War, and the massive antifascist protests of 1934 that generated newspaper headlines: "Le Fascisme ne passera pas!" In fact, "They will not pass" becomes the cornerstone of Redfield's reading: "No pasarán" is the watchword of the defenders of Madrid during the Spanish Civil War too. This shibboleth can be repeated, transmitted, or cited by anyone and anywhere; it *welcomes* all accents and all pronunciations. Belonging to an extended community of solidarity (in these contexts, it is always used as a word of protest), it negates the technologies of testing that it had so far been considered to have instituted. This community is open to anyone willing to affirm that Fascists will not pass. At the same time, it remains exposed to the threat of sovereign violence and exclusion (that the Fascists may pass, as indeed, they did), and equally remains vulnerable to reappropriation, mimicry, and failure. In other words, the text of "In eins", while alluding to significant events of revolution and protest in European history and reclaiming the shibboleth from its role as a murderously violent technique, cannot entirely neutralize sovereign violence. Hence, as Redfield argues following Derrida, the poem opens itself to the event, the risk, to a singularly other (threat and chance) yet to come.

Then, Redfield offers a close reading of Celan's "Schibboleth" to argue that even though at first sight it appears to be a typically post-Romantic poem, its seductive clarity is misleading, its references are multiple and overlapping, and it is precisely because the poem leaves mimetic representation behind that it becomes a political force. Among other things, Redfield shows that "the foreignness of the homeland" not only results from the Fascist catastrophe; the homeland can no longer

be understood in naturalistic terms; indeed, it could never have been. The "I" is also disjointed and opens up to the voices of the dead, just like the multiplicity of the addressees. Ultimately, as Redfield concludes, "the lyric-heroic *ich* and the various permutations of the reflexive *sich* scramble into the *s-c-h-i* of a *S(ch)ibboleth,* that also encrypts and suspends within it the signature Ant*sch*el, the name that the poet anagrammatized (via the Romanian spelling Ancel; in Romanian the *ce* letter group is pronounced *tsch*) to Celan (the initial phoneme pronounced "s" in French, "ts" in German, "tsch" in Romanian). The reading imperative "Ruf's, in eins, Celans »Schibboleth«" and the authorial calling out "ich, Celan" are shibboleth-apostrophes suspended between multiple pronunciations and breathless cuts, poly(a)phonic, apopneumatic (p. 55).

In the next chapter, following Shoshana Felman and others,[2] including Derrida, Redfield comments on Celan's use of the mother tongue. Famously, Celan did not cede the use of German to the Nazis: even after the Holocaust, he continued to write in German. For him, language "went through" the horrors, gave "new words" for what was happening, but resurfaced "enriched". Earlier, Redfield elaborated on how sc(h)ibooleth identified the mother-tongue speaker in the Biblical story; but for Celan, as his 1954 letter to Isa Chiva testifies, sc(h)ibboleth is more a sign of recognition than a means of exclusion.

Redfield then returns to the story of Babel, which he reads as generating the fantasy of pure translation, the erasure of the shibboleth, and language itself. Indeed this is certainly also the story of complete confusion, of otherness always already inherent in language. As a supplement, Redfield evokes the Pentecost story and "speaking in tongues", when everyone in the crowd hears the other speaking in their mother tongue. "How hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?" Pentecostal speech thus becomes both the mother tongue and every other language of the world; it both passes and fails the shibboleth test. And while Celan's poem aspires to Pentecostal speech, it has no evangelical dimension; rather, like a political slogan or broadcast, it scatters and disseminates incalculably, both guarding its secret and remaining open to reading, to death speaking from and to the dead.

In the last chapter of the book, Redfield turns to the Columbian artist Doris Salcedo's installation *Shibboleth,* exhibited in the Tate Modern in 2007. The work took the form of a long crack in the floor. It was an "abyss" that had "torn the Tate in two, possibly translating and citing Celan and Derrida. It is a commentary on art, artworks, the institution of the museum, and the wounding of colonized cultures by colonial cultures; it also bears witness to the unimaginable amount of suffering

2 Felman, "Education and Crisis."

in Columbia. Yet, commemorating and not reporting, it forwards an impossible responsibility and points to the exposure of poetic language we witnessed in Celan's works.

Literature

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