

The Essence of Babel:
Rousseau on the Origin of Languages

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Rousseau did not publish the *Essay on the Origins of Language* during his lifetime. In a projected Preface to a volume that would have included along with the *Essay* two other pieces (*On Theatrical Imitation* and *The Levite of Ephraim*), Rousseau writes that it was “at first only a fragment of the *Discourse on Inequality* that I cut out of it as too long and out of place.”¹ The full title of the *Discourse on Inequality* is, of course, *The Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*. It poses a puzzle. If men are naturally apolitical, how did they come to live in political society? And if, to be the political animal means to be the animal with *logos*, understood as both speech and reason, how does the animal without *logos* come to have *logos*? Rousseau indicates the enormous difficulty of this question in the *Discourse on Inequality* itself:

For if men had need of speech in order to learn to think, they had indeed still more need of knowing how to think in order to find the art of speech. (§ 68)²

and shortly thereafter:

As for me, frightened by the difficulties that multiply themselves, and convinced of the nearly demonstrated impossibility that languages could be born and establish themselves by purely human means, I leave to whoever would undertake it the discussion of this difficult problem: which was the more necessary, a society already bound together for the institution of languages or already invented languages for the establishment of society? (§ 74)

The question of the origin of language is thus in a sense the same as the question of the origin of political society. Now, at the beginning the *Essay on the Origin* [singular] of *Languages* [plural], Rousseau claims that “speech, being the first social institution, must owe its form only to natural causes” (1.1). The first social institution must originate in something that is not socially

¹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Essai sur d'origine des langues* (Paris: Galimard, 1990), 57. Translations from the *Essai* are my own; quotations are cited by chapter number and paragraph number within the chapter.

² Translations from the *Discours* are my own; quotations are cited by paragraph number.

instituted—that is, something natural, not conventional.³ By nature “speech distinguishes man among the animals” (1.1), but speech shows up only as a particular language rooted in a place and distinguishing nations among themselves. Why then are there languages rather than language? How does one account for the single origin of difference, and how does one *natural* origin yield diverse *conventional* results? What does it mean that human nature is by nature conventional? Is there an essence of Babel? This is our first question.

The curious path Rousseau follows in addressing this question is hinted at in his subtitle: *Where Something is Said about Melody and Musical Imitation*. Why need the question of language be glossed as a question of music? Music becomes an explicit issue in the last third of the *Essay* (chapters 12-20), but why? Our second question then is why the origin of political life necessarily leads us to music.

Finally, it is a regular feature of Rousseau’s writing to present what seem to be logical relations as temporal movements. The *Second Discourse* contains multiple examples of animals that fall just short of being human in the state of nature (consider, e.g., the pongo, orangutan, quojas morros, beggo, and mandrill of note j) and multiple examples of human beings who live in a state that falls just short of natural (consider the Hottentot of note j and the Carib of paragraph 63), but there is not a single example of a human being in this presumably natural state. Because the pongo lacks speech, we are in no position to say whether it has that capacity to acquire speech characteristic of natural man. The pongo is natural, but it is not a man. Rousseau seems at first to mean to describe the Carib as having a “soul that, agitated by nothing, delivers itself to the sole sentiment of its own present existence without any idea of the future,” but he cannot mean what he seems to mean, for he goes on to say that the Carib “sells his cotton bed in the morning and, weeping, comes in the evening to buy it back, failing to have foreseen that he would have need of it for the next night.” In order to show that the Carib lacks foresight, Rousseau endows him with language and a notion of monetary gain, both requiring foresight and so neither of which can be present in natural man; the Carib is a man, but he is not natural.⁴ For this and other reasons, over time one is gradually led to conclude that the state of nature is

³ The word *langues* nicely hints at the problem here, for like the English “tongue” it may either stand for a part of the body or for what issues from this part, thus embodying the curious togetherness of nature and convention that is proper to language.

⁴ For these references see Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondemens de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Editions de Seuil: 1971), Vol. 2, 219 and 254-57.

rather a logical foundation of our understanding of human beings than their temporal origin.⁵ *On the Social Contract* is supposed to provide us with an account of the original agreement that stands at the beginning of political life, and yet every attempt to get at such an agreement seems to presuppose an already prior agreement—*assembler* and *unir* are always *rassembler* and *reunir*, idiomatically synonyms that betray the deep problem involved in giving any account of what comes first.⁶ And, while *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* seems at first to provide examples of reverie as that state in which we timelessly experience the sweet sentiment of our own existence, here too each such example is either a leading up to or a falling away from the perfect contentment of such a state.⁷ We are initially led to believe that *Emile* will be an account of the imaginary education of a child over time. Rousseau adopts a baby at birth and brings him to manhood in such a way that he will avoid the *amour propre* that ordinarily causes us to live outside ourselves. *Emile* will be educated “according to nature” so that his present is not sacrificed for his future. To the greatest extent possible, his desires and powers will be in harmony. On the surface, the first serious threat to this equilibrium is the onset of sexuality in adolescence. *Emile*, therefore, appears to be an account of the fundamental transformation of human nature over time. On further examination, however, we discover the seeds of alienation already present in infancy.⁸ Accordingly, our third question is why Rousseau repeatedly begins by presenting as though they unfolded in time relations that in the end must be understood as logical.

In a way that is initially not altogether clear, the second and third of our questions—which turn on music and time—are brought together in Rousseau’s account of the relation between melody and harmony in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Melody is more fundamental than harmony; in particular, it distinguishes itself from harmony by unfolding in time. Is it possible, then, that this primacy of melody is connected first to the nature of language, and thereafter, by way of language, to the nature of thinking? And by first understanding the essentially melodious character of human thinking might we thereafter also understand why

⁵ See my *Autobiography of Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield: 1999), 89-92.

⁶ For just a few of the many examples see *Oeuvres Complètes* Vol. 2, 222, 230, 239, 242 (these are in the *Second Discourse*) and 523, 536, 563 (these are in *On the Social Contract*). Consider also my *The Autobiography of Philosophy, 183 and Wonderlust; Ruminations on Liberal Education* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press: 2006), 109-112.

⁷ See *The Autobiography of Philosophy*, 113-29 and 169-88.

⁸ Consider Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, Book 1, paragraphs 150-56 in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Editions de Seuil: 1971), Vol. 3, 45-46.

Rousseau finds it necessary to unfold the logical as though it were temporal? If so, our three questions would resolve themselves into one.

Let us begin with the essence of Babel. Rousseau first attributes the plurality of languages to location.⁹ Before encountering a language other than his own one might well take the world he experiences as the world simply. Afterward, however, he would have learned not only that the speaker of this strange tongue is not from this place; he would also know that he himself is from somewhere.¹⁰ We may learn the language of our country out of usage and need, but this does not yet teach us why this language belongs to this country. We are forced to wonder how a universal and natural cause can be thought together with a local and conventional effect. And, of course, this mating of universality and particularity is itself at the very heart of language.

In the second paragraph of Chapter One of the *Essay*, Rousseau articulates the strange precondition of all speech.

As soon as a man was recognized by another for a sensing being, thinking and similar to him, the desire or the need of communicating to him his sentiments and his thoughts to him made him seek the means for it.

A wants to communicate with B as soon as he has been recognized by B as a subject; this seems straightforward enough.¹¹ But when we look at the matter from the point of view of B, it gets crooked. To recognize A, B would already have to have been recognized by A. so, while we expect Rousseau to say that recognizing another as similar moves us to attempt to communicate, in fact, the origin of language involves *being recognized* by another or—since being anonymously recognized would not affect us at all—*sensing* that we have been recognized. What is at issue in the sentence is revealed by Rousseau’s intentionally ambiguous use of the word “him,” which seems to apply now to the one recognized and now the one recognizing. It

⁹ He thus echoes the use of the word *où* in the subtitle. Writing gives speech a place.

¹⁰ Compare the first sentence of Part 2 of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*.

¹¹ The verb Rousseau chooses here is not unimportant. *Reconnaître* has a range of meanings that includes both “to know” and “to know again.” In *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau uses the similarly ambiguous verbs *rassembler* and *réunir* to describe the action of men who come together to form a social contract. The perhaps vestigial prefix “re” allows him to finesse the deep question of what sort of prior agreement would be necessary for isolated human beings to come together to talk. The putatively “first” assembly of human beings can be thought of only as a reassembly. Similarly, the putatively “first” cognition of another as a subject must be thought of as a *recognition*. For Rousseau, the origin of language no less than the origin of social life is not really temporal.

calls our attention to what ties the two together. Both are indirect objects—beings to whom things happen. They are only indirectly objects, for their similarity really consists in being subjects. Rousseau's opening remark thus suggests that we are somehow capable of sensing that we are being sensed—we are capable of experiencing a subject as a subject and not simply as an object. It is this sense of having been recognized that generates in us a desire or a need to communicate our thoughts and sentiments. That is, we seek to communicate what we are as sensing/thinking beings—indirectly to communicate our selves .

If to make our selves known to another as a subject is the precondition for all communication, how exactly is this to be done? That I am a sensing being means that I internalize things. This internalizing is what must become known by the other if we are to communicate. But this can only be done by somehow externalizing the process of internalizing; it must be made available to the senses. To sense that one is being recognized means to sense another sensing one's sensing. By beginning his account of this process at the moment one is recognized by another, Rousseau artfully finesses the question of how the initial recognition is possible. We come in in the middle. He therefore gives us an account of what must have transpired for communication to take place but never gives us an account of how it is possible for it to have transpired. Apparently the dilemma of the *Discourse on Inequality* is not so easily resolved.

The *Essay on the Origin of Languages* proceeds by way of a series of dualisms. The initial divide is between the language of gesture and that of voice—the first more objective, the second more passionate. Rousseau subsequently distinguishes between the language of need and the language of passion (chapter 2) , between literal and figural language and so between prose and poetry (chapter 3), between the use in language of discrete and continuous sound (chapter 4), between writing and speech (chapters 5-7), between the languages of the north and those of the south (chapters 8-11), between the non-musical and the musical (chapters 12-17), and, within music, between harmony (chapter 14) and melody (chapter 13). He concludes the *Essay* with an account of the degeneration of music from the time of the Greeks that segues to an account of a similar political degeneration (chapters 18-20).

Communicating is initially a matter of getting someone's attention. This involves initiating some change available to sensation. Rousseau suggests two possibilities—spatial movement sensed either by touch or by sight, and temporal movement, i.e., sound. But, although

touch works well even in the dark, it has a very limited spatial range. Accordingly Rousseau concentrates on comparing communication by way of sight—what he calls the language of gesture—and communication by way of sound through the voice. The two are equally natural but have different advantages. Sounds seize our attention more readily than sights, but, our attention once assured, sight shows us more in less time.¹² Gestural language is thus more articulate and, since its images resemble the things they image, less conventional than the language of voice. Rousseau adds that it is also easier.

Because of this ease and superior precision, we are naturally tempted to think of the language of gesture as the origin of language—as “first.” Rousseau provides us with a series of examples designed to tempt us in this direction; yet, upon reflection, none of them is particularly appropriate or convincing. From Pliny the Elder Rousseau borrows the girl who out of love for an absent beloved was supposed to be the inventor of drawing (1.4).¹³ The drawing, a figure available to sight, is a representation of the beloved—a remembrance. But its power really results from its failure. In its inability adequately to make the beloved present, to *represent* him, it is rather an image of *her* love than an image of her beloved. Rousseau follows this with several examples from “ancient history” of “arguments to the eyes” that supposedly “never fail to produce an effect more assured than all the discourses one might have been able to put in their place” (1.7). Yet when, in response to a message from his son, Tarquin walks into his garden and lops off the heads of the tallest poppies, the whole point of the story is that the herald entrusted with his answer does not understand its meaning. A powerful image to be sure, it gets one’s attention, but by itself it does not tell us that to assure one’s unrivaled rule it is necessary to annihilate the potential competition.¹⁴ This is true as well of each of Rousseau’s subsequent examples (Thrasylbulus, Alexander, Diogenes, Darius, and Hyperides from Greek history and the Levite of Ephriam and Saul from the *Bible*). Darius knows that when the Scythians send him a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows they mean to warn him, but even in Herodotus’s account there is disagreement about what the meaning of this warning is.¹⁵ And when Saul cuts up a pair

¹² Consider Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 980b22-28.

¹³ The example is taken from Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.43.12.

¹⁴ The story comes from Livy’s *History of Rome* 1.54.

¹⁵ See Herodotus’s *History* 4.131

of oxen and sends the pieces throughout Israel, to make his point, he must add, i.e. add in speech, that whoever doesn't follow him and Samuel will have the same done to their oxen.¹⁶

Are these arguments “to the eyes”? Are they not rather stories about the power of vision in which the story provides the context that makes their interpretation possible? For in each case Rousseau cites of the lucidity of gestural language, a prior understanding proves to be necessary. Powerful sights attract our attention, but to serve as language, they must be taken as something other than what they are. As answers, Rousseau's “arguments to the eyes” presuppose certain questions, certain felt needs. Rousseau thus undermines his view of the priority of the language of gesture as easier, clearer, and less conventional than the language of sound in its articulation of objects, and does so at the very moment he seems to affirm it:

Thus, one speaks much better to the eyes than to the ears: there is no one who does not sense the truth of the judgment of Horace¹⁷ in this regard. One even sees that the most eloquent discourses are those where the most images are inserted, and sounds never have more energy than when they produce the effect of colors.
(1.9)

Rousseau's own language here is revealing. It suggests not so much the power of vision but of speech making use of imaginary vision. It therefore makes the case not for the superiority of the language of sight but for the superiority of poetry, already a hybrid, over prose.

When he turns to the language of voice (1.10-14), Rousseau introduces time. In place of a static vision (a *coup d'oeil*) we are confronted with a sequence (*coups redoublés*) that sets what is communicated in an unfolding context. But this is to place at center stage the subject for whom meaning is unfolding. *Sens* as sensing displaces *sens* as meaning. The language of voice is characterized by accent. This, in turn, brings with it the possibility of communicating intensity, but of course also of meaning. Think of the difference between “No!”, “No, No, it's ok.”, and “No???” Nothing can be said without tone (flatness too is a tone), and tone points not to the state of the object articulated but to the state of the subject who is articulating. The language of voice thus brings you inside the speaker. Rousseau indicates this movement rather beautifully by speaking of “accents from which *one* cannot screen *one's* organ . . . and which in spite of *ourselves* convey to it the emotions that wring them from *us* and cause *us* to sense what *we*

¹⁶ See I Samuel 11.1-7

¹⁷ See *Ars Poetica*, 180, where Horace says that what comes before the eyes stirs the mind more vividly than what comes through the ears. It is of course important that it is the mind that is stirred.

hear/understand” (1.10—the italics are mine). Rousseau means to indicate the change that voice brings to language; in doing so his own language moves from the impersonal pronoun *on* to the first person plural *nous*. Gesture might seem to be the language of the *on*, of pure articulation. Rousseau’s first chapter suggests that such a language does not really exist.

This stands to reason. As Heraclitus was perhaps first to remark, *logos* is double; it communicates and it articulates.¹⁸ Still, it is one thing.¹⁹ Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* means to spell out this problematic unity. The real point of the “was recognized” is that the “sense” of another as sentient is not obviously available to the senses. It rather points to the problem of the context necessary for speech, a context that naturally cannot be established by any speech, whether gestural or vocal. We speak to another with the expectation of a possible answer. Both parties to speech must pay attention and command attention. Language is not simply a device to show what we are thinking. We speak first not to show things but to show ourselves. This would have to be the case. One would never begin by expressing an objective need, for to do so presupposes that someone would care. Language thus always expresses the subject “before” it expresses the object even though this “before” cannot be understood temporally. Language articulates. It shows us things by showing us what sets one thing apart from others—what differentiates or defines it. Language communicates. We use it to tell others what we know and what we feel. Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* means to articulate and to communicate to us the inseparable bond between these two functions of language. Every communication is a communication of; every articulation is an articulation to.²⁰

This necessary togetherness of communication and articulation is the thread that ties the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* together. Chapter 1 leaves us wondering whether a purely gestural language might be possible, one based solely on physical needs. Rousseau likens it to the “language” of beavers. But chapter 2 makes clear that language comes not from need but from passion. Human needs may be the same but since we compete to satisfy them, need, by

¹⁸ See Heraclitus, Fragment 1 as well as Benardete, Seth, *The Archaeology of the Soul: Platonic Readings of Ancient Poetry and Philosophy* (South Bend, IN: 2010, St. Augustine’s Press), chapter 13.

¹⁹ In Greek, a single verb, *dialegein*, means in its active voice to select or separate and in its middle-passive form, *dialegethai*, to converse. Thus Aristotle can treat rational and political as the single defining characteristic of the human animal.

²⁰ Thinking is a conversation in which we are our own interlocutors. While, to be sure, this is unlike any other conversation, it does involve putting questions to ourselves. Articulation is not something we do without a motive. Insofar as thinking means asking questions of ourselves or of others so as to yield a response, it involves communication.

itself, would drive us apart. What brings us together is passion, what Rousseau calls here “moral need.” It is a disposition not toward an object but toward a subject. Hunger expresses a need for food; love, a passion, expresses a need for another subject. Need may dictate the first gestures but passion wrests from us voice. Accordingly, “the first languages were songlike and passionate before being simple and methodical” (2.3). Apparently this never simply changes, for Rousseau concludes this chapter with a caveat: “All this is not indiscriminately true, but I will return to it hereafter” (2.3). If no speech is without tone, then no speech is simply objective. Rousseau is kind enough to point out to us that this must apply perforce to his own speech as well.

Lest we have missed Rousseau’s playful reflexivity at the end of chapter 2, he quickly reminds us of it again in chapter 3. First he tells us that the first language was figural and not literal (this is itself strange; one might have thought figural language would be the language of figures—of visible forms). He means that we do not first sense things in their true form; we sense them through sentiment or passion. Awakened in the night by enemies and frightened, we see them as bigger and stronger than they are. We mistakenly call them giants. It is a natural metaphor. We see not objects but our own fear. In a weird inversion of Molière’s M. Jourdain, Rousseau’s savage eventually awakens to discover he has been speaking poetry his whole life. Of course, since he didn’t know it was poetry, it wasn’t really poetry. Poetry would seem to involve the sort of intentional overstatement to which Rousseau has just recently confessed. At first it seems that the poetic dominates language only in its infancy, but

I sense strongly that here the reader is stopping me and asking me how an expression can be figural before having a proper sense since it is only in the transfer/translation of sense that figure consists. (3.2)

Of course Rousseau cannot actually sense his reader as a subject. He must therefore sense himself imagining the reader. Does Rousseau’s “I sense” have something to do with the content of what he senses—i.e., the objection that the proper meaning of a word must precede its figural meaning? Rousseau seems to pose the following question: If figural language is always a transfer of sense, must there not first be something to be transferred. Now, Rousseau responds to the hypothetical question of his reader with an example—his metaphorical giants. But an example is a figural response—one thing stands in for another. Rousseau, thus, seems to be describing a characteristic of language as such. Or, when Rousseau says that “poetry comes

first,” he is using a poetic trope, a figure. Examples are *the* example of the on-going figural character of language. Speech is never simply proper but always poetic. M. Jourdain to the contrary notwithstanding, we actually never speak prose.

At the same time, “original” poetry is not simply poetic, for, while “the illusory image offered by passion showed itself first,” “it became subsequently metaphorical when the enlightened mind recognized its first error” (3.3). To say that the “first” language is figural thus means that language always involves mistaking our relation *to* the world for an object *in* the world. To discover this error, to discover the necessarily figural character of language, is to make an object of language itself. This is to discover the subject.

Chapter 4 is entitled “Of the Distinctive Characters of the First Language and of the Changes it Must Have Met With.” Rousseau introduces vowels as continuous sounds and consonants as distinctive stops. Vowels seem to belong with the character of language as voiced, passionate, sung, non-articulating, infinite and natural. Consonants seem to belong with language as precise, objective, rational, finite, discrete, and conventional. The one communicates the subject; the other articulates the object. This suggestion is quickly followed, however, by an account of the manner in which continuous sound is differentiated by pitch, duration, and loudness—all matters of intensity, to be sure, but nevertheless introducing several different principles of discreteness. One could in principle have a language without consonants based solely on pitch. This, in turn, calls our attention to the pun contained in the chapter’s title. The distinctive characteristics (*caractères*) of the first language might be read as its distinctive characters—i.e., letters; indeed the word will be used in this sense in the next chapter (5.1). The point of the pun seems to be that even in the “song” of the first language there is something comparable to the letters of writing.

Rousseau introduces his extended reflection on writing in chapter 5 with the following remark:

Whoever studies the history and the progress of languages will see that the more voices become monotone the more consonants increase in number, and that as accents are effaced, as quantities are equalized, one supplants them with grammatical combinations and new articulations...; as enlightenment spreads, language changes in character; it becomes more precise/just [*juste*] and less passionate; it substitutes for sentiments ideas; it no longer speaks to the heart but to reason. In the same way, accent is extinguished, articulation spreads, language becomes more exact, clearer, but more sluggish, more muted, and colder. This progress appears to me completely natural. (5.1)

The chapter attributes this change to the invention of writing, which because it deprives speech of voice deprives it of its tone, its passion. Rousseau discusses three species of writing, but the final form, in which letters originally stand for sounds, ends up breaking free altogether from the spoken language, so much so that different languages can use the same set of characters. What remains is dominated by the discrete characters on the page; the spirit of consonants triumphs and the continuous character of language is all but lost. As a consequence, we come more and more to speak as we read, in a monotone. As language becomes flat, its *sens* must reside in what it says (meaning), rather than how it says it (sentiment). It reforms itself repeatedly to make up for the loss. Vocabulary increases, to compensate for the way a speaker can alter the meaning of a word by his tone, as do conventions for punctuation.

Now all of this seems quite awful, and, apparently wishing to confirm our sense of loss, Rousseau moves to a discussion of the superior poetic voice of Homer in chapter 6 and to modern prosody's attempt to restore voice to written language in chapter 7. Homer's poetry is so powerful that Rousseau says he has often been tempted to think that Homer could not have known how to write; indeed, were it not for the fact that writing is mentioned in the story of Bellerophon in *Iliad* 6, Rousseau says he would have thought the Greeks of Homer's time did not even possess writing. This is a wonderful joke, for if modern French lacks the capacity to communicate passion present in the more musical language of Homer, how can Rousseau, who knows of Homer's passion only by way of the written versions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, give such a passionate account of Homer's superiority—and in French. The *sens* of Homer's poetry must be available in writing, or Rousseau would not be able to make the argument he has just made. And despite the tendency for accent to become simply another letter in modern languages so that as writing gradually replaces speech as the primary form of language, clarity is purchased at the cost of force, and language becomes increasingly flat, this does not prevent Rousseau from jokingly suggesting that since, in a way, in written language all letters are like consonants,

[i]n those that one burdens with useless consonants, writing seems even to have preceded speech, and who wouldn't believe the Polish [language] is such a case? If it were, then Polish ought to be the coldest of all languages. (7.9)

Along with Rousseau's pun on "character" and his passionate written praise of the passion manifest the oral poetry of Homer, this early Polish joke is the third bit of *written* playfulness in

as many chapters. Can writing really be so flat when it so handily accommodates humorous tone?

Rousseau began the *Essay* with a distinction between the language of gesture, ideas, and needs and the language of voice and passion, but the distinction breaks down. He then somehow combines the two in poetry—speaking images—and compares this to proper sense. This distinction too breaks down. Then he compares, rather passionately and in writing, the passionate character of spoken language to the flat objectivity of written language. Needless to say this too breaks down. What then has he shown? We have been introduced to a recurring tension within all language. It sometimes shows itself as the tension between the continuous and the discrete, sometimes between the subjective and the objective, between the musical and meaning. It is the double *sens* of *sens*. This tension is at once common to all language and the origin of the variety of languages—it is the essence of Babel.

Now if chapters 1-7 of the *Essay* articulate the potential for variety in language owing to this tension, chapters 8-11 turn to the external catalyst responsible for actualizing some one of these potentialities. Rousseau had already indicated at the outset that this catalyst would be locality (1.1). Here he provides a general account of place—the principle of the specificity of language. He does so by speaking of difference of place generically. We do not get an account of what differentiates Arabic from English (or for that matter English from Polish) but instead an account of the differences of the “languages of the north” over and against the “languages of the south.” According to Rousseau, it is a distinction frequently lost on Europeans who take winter, and so suffering, for granted as the original and natural human condition even though it is not the condition of two-thirds of the globe. As a result, they do not think the awareness of suffering requires explanation. They may think (*penser*) in the sense of rationally addressing a specific problem, but they do not think (*songer*) in the sense of dreaming, musing, or turning their eyes away from themselves so as to “carry their viewing to the distance” (8.1).²¹ They do not understand that “one must first observe differences in order to discover one’s own things” (8.1)—i.e. one must look outside to get at what is within. This means realizing that the human race, born in warm countries, “extends itself” from there into cold countries (although Rousseau offers no explanation as to why it should do so). Being expansive necessarily precedes turning

²¹ Rousseau makes a similar distinction in the *Rêveries* between the way the soul in meditation turns back on itself and is constricted as opposed to its expansive going out of itself in reverie. See *Rêveries* 8.1-2 and 5.14-15.

back on oneself. This is the truth of movement generally, and specifically of the “ceaseless agitation” (8.2) of human beings. According to Rousseau, and he apologizes for it here, it even characterizes the movement of his own inquiry. A question originates in need. This, in turn, generates an expansion that ends by treating the subject (*sujet*) so trivially that it leads to a contraction, a return to what originally generated the question. This movement is perfectly natural and necessary to get at the origins of human institutions. Digression is apparently a necessary and not accidental feature of Rousseau’s inquiry.

At first Rousseau’s argument seems fairly straightforward. Whereas in northern climates need prevails, in the south, as needs are not so pressing, passions come to the fore. In the north there is no time for niceties—for poetry; accordingly, language is terse and direct. It concentrates on articulating the object at hand, for without the object the speaker might well perish. In the south, men have the leisure to regard one another, and language reflects passion rather than need. As it means to lull, to seduce, and to persuade, it is more poetic. The language of the south emphasizes communication with another subject. The two climates thus emphasize the two poles of speech—articulation and communication.

And yet things are never so simple in the *Essay*. At the end of chapter 8, Rousseau had apologized for his digressions (his natural expansions). This apology is immediately followed by what seems an expansive digression at the beginning of chapter 9, by far the longest chapter of the book. Its title is “Formation of Southern Languages,” and yet we do not get to the decisive issue, climate, until paragraph twenty-one, and not until paragraph thirty to its specific application to the languages of the south. The first nineteen paragraphs are concerned with that Rousseau calls the “first times.” They are not exactly temporally first but rather recur whenever human beings are dispersed. For the first time here, Rousseau indicates that only a being with imagination can acquire language and become social. Imagination is what puts pity into play, and pity involves “transporting ourselves out of ourselves and identifying ourselves with the suffering being” (9.2). Now, *transporter* is in French a literal rendering of the Greek *metapherein*—which is cognate with metaphor. Here, this transportation is associated with the imagination—what enables us to compare ideas, and so reflect (9.3). Rousseau even goes so far as to say that when we encounter a new object, we want to know it. To do so we seek relations between it and what we already know. This leads us to observe what we think we already know.

In other words, we come to understand the familiar as itself strange. This is Aristotle's understanding of the power of metaphor.²²

This unacknowledged return to the issue of poetic speech comes just before a series of examples the putative purpose of which is to show how differences in language originate in the different ways human beings feed themselves. But each example proves puzzling. The Cyclopes are introduced to represent the herding life; the point is supposedly that such a life does not require laws, but one cannot mention the Cyclopes without tacitly calling to mind Polyphemus, the oldest extended example of cannibalism in Greek literature.²³ Rousseau cites, to mention only a few, the story of Cain, a story from Genesis (8.15-22) that suggests the possibility of the annihilation of an entire species of animals for a sacrifice, God's response to it which is a law prohibiting the shedding of blood, a Greek prohibition against meat-eating, and an account of how the Greeks ate that neglects to mention that the meal in question is the largest sacrifice to the gods ever mentioned in Greek literature. In each of these examples eating proves to be much more than mere eating and involves either some form of prohibition, or something is explicitly allowed but always connected to a religious practice. This is confirmed by Rousseau's remarkable claim that "The first cake which was eaten was the communion of the human race" (9.11).

The emphasis on religious ritual in this digression has to do with what Rousseau understands as the root of both political life and of language. What he has in mind is revealed when he identifies the greatest threat to political life as "war and conquests, which are only manhunts. "After having conquered them, it only remained for them to devour them" (9.16). Rousseau's digression on the development of men from the "first times" is meant to show us how we are marked off as human, that is to say social and speaking, only to the extent that we recognize the sacredness of the subject. This is the *sens* of the prohibition against cannibalism. The origin of language as the first human institution has to do with the acknowledgment of the other as a sensing thinking being. Rousseau both aware of the importance of our ability to sense another as a subject and aware that he cannot fully account for its possibility. That it is possible however seems to show itself in the fact that our language is from the beginning poetic. The problem is how we can come to sense the other as sensing if we sense only objects. This is

²² *On Poetics*, chapter 22.

²³ See Homer, *Odyssey* 9.105-566,

connected to the problem of how the essentially utilitarian issue of providing ourselves with sustenance gets transformed into religious issues of prohibition and sacrifice. Rousseau wants to say this “transformation” never really occurs because human behavior, like human language, is always poetic. In the context of chapter 9, what this means is that, properly speaking, there is no such thing as a language born of need. The languages of north and south are mutually dependent.

Rousseau will acknowledge as much; at first, though, he seems to have it in mind to contrast harsh and gentle origins.

Gentle climates, fat and fertile countries, were the first peopled and the last where nations were formed because there men could more easily do without one another, and because the needs that made society to be born made themselves sensed there later. (9.21)

Where life is easy because the climate is mild, men do not need each other and so live dispersed. Only where life is hard do they live together and consequently procreate regularly. This, in turn, leads to an increase in numbers and a necessity to seek greener pastures. So men leave the harsh climate of the north and *rassembler* in one that is more hospitable. Accordingly, human intercourse *always* seems to begin out of need or want. The need for water first drove the men of the south to sink their wells (9.30, 34). Only then could these same wells become the locations for lovers’ trysts.

There the eyes accustomed to the same objects from infancy began to see sweeter ones. The heart was moved by these new objects; an unknown attraction rendered it less savage; it sensed the pleasure of not being alone. Insensibly, water became more necessary, the cattle were thirsty more often; one arrived in haste and left with regret. In this happy age where nothing marked the hours, nothing obliged one to count them. Time had no other measure than amusement and boredom. Under old oaks, conquerors of years, an ardent youth by degrees forgot its ferocity. They were tamed little by little, the ones by the others. In striving to make themselves understood, they learned to explain themselves. There the first festivals took place. Feet skipped with joy. Earnest gesture sufficed no longer. Voice accompanied it with passionate accents. Pleasure and desire, confounded together, made themselves sensed at the same time. There, finally, was the true cradle of peoples, and from the pure crystals of the fountains sprang the first fires of love. (9.35)

This is a beautiful poem. It makes it seem as though the race grows into the language of passion in the way a young child grows into adolescence. It is of a piece with the surface of the history of the “first times” at the beginning of the chapter. But a closer look at Rousseau’s extended

account of the history of human eating suggested that the harshness of human origins, and so of human language, was always softened by poetry. We therefore have reason to be skeptical of the temporal character of the account at the end of chapter 9 where Rousseau suggests that the softness of poetry was a natural outgrowth out of the harshness of our origins in need.

Rousseau's poem seems rather a temporal-genetic version of the necessity of the togetherness of articulation and communication that is the nature of all language.

Finally, in structure and in detail, the stories of north and south prove remarkably similar. There are not two sorts of language—one born of need and the other of passion. Both are born when men notice that they need each other, which can only happen when they recognize the status of others as *semblables*. This mutual recognition of suffering goes hand in hand with the possibility of enjoying each other's company. Fire as useful comes to be recognized as also pleasant, or perhaps sacred. This moment—i.e., when we come to be aware of objects as having hidden advantages, or when we see things as images, and so poetic—marks our coming to awareness of different possible perspectives, and so of subjectivity. It marks the discovery of others as *sujets*. Still, the *tone* in which the two are presented is altogether different, and this marks a genuine difference. Although the pleasures of passion can never serve as the source of our coming together, they become more prominent as the need that united us recedes. Once built, the well is there, and the need that gave rise to it is diminished; winter, however, is a constant. In the south the relative ease of the acquisition of the object allows for an emphasis on the manner or style of its acquisition. Because meaning can be taken for granted, tone comes to dominate language. It is no accident that at the end of chapter 9 for the first time Rousseau refers to other human beings as objects (9.35).

Just as the south conceals our ongoing need, the north teases us with the pleasures of passion. For a few weeks each year the people of the north are allowed to relax; as a consequence they know that they suffer for the rest of the year. Their needs, now perceived in common, become mutual—they thereby become passions. “Before dreaming/thinking (*songer*) about living happy, it was necessary to dream/think (*songer*) about living” (10.3). Accordingly, Rousseau says that among them the first word was not “love me” (*aimez-moi*) but “help me” (*aidez-moi*). It is a beautiful image, for a single letter differentiates the language of the north from that of the south (somehow both north and south are united in speaking French). The bilabial nasal “m” is opposed to the dental occlusive “d.” Both articulate—they are consonants

and not vowels. But *aidez* is much harder and more consonant-like (it is also uttered with the mouth open). Now, however Rousseau means that it comes “first,” whatever he means by the temporal priority of need to passion, it is clear that this cannot simply be true, for why would I help you if I don’t like you? In this sense the language of the south is more fundamental and prior.

Rousseau must acknowledge this and so must admit that “the men of the north are not without passion, but they have another species of it” (10.5). Different things are taken for granted in the north and in the south. Southerners are voluptuous; their passion involves an immediate longing for the other, who therefore seems so little problematic as to be almost an object. Northerners are irascible; the other is perceived as a constant problem, from whom help, should it come, is from the other as other. In the north the *sujet* somehow comes to the fore because it is not so much at the fore already. In the north men look to one another for assistance and are angry when they do not get it, but their language is not the language of sacred mysteries (11.1). It does not obviously extend beyond their needs, and so things seem to be what they are. Here need looms so large that we pay attention to *what* this subject can do for us and tend to gloss over the fact of his doing.

What then is the problem Rousseau means to address by playing off north against south? All language must have two elements. It must articulate the world—it must mean something, have *sens*. It must communicate this meaning *to* someone and so indicate that it is *from* someone—it must make its *sens* sensible. When the communication is subjectively urgent, the emphasis will, ironically, fall on the meaning—the thing communicated. And when what is needed, the object, is not so urgent, the emphasis will drift to the self doing the communicating. But then this self comes to be what one wants or needs and so, as itself an object of desire, its character as subject will be suppressed. Rousseau at first seems to favor the south, but in the end this is not so clear. At any rate, he means to use the comparison to raise the final question that dominates the remainder of the *Essay*: What would it mean to make an object of the subject? This is what Rousseau thinks music attempts to do.

Rousseau begins his account of music with a distinction.

With the first voices, the first articulations or the first sounds formed themselves according to the type of passion that dictated the one or the other. Anger

wrenches menacing cries that the tongue [or language] and the palate [or palace] articulate; but the voice of tenderness is more gentle—it is the glottis that modifies it, and this voice becomes a sound. (12.1)²⁴

The difference between articulation and sound is grounded in a split within passion. Anger breaks the sound continuum into discrete parts; tenderness alters the continuum in another way—pitch. Yet the two are no more really separable from one another than are articulation and communication, or the languages of the north from those of the south. All speech must have a tempo and a pitch. Accordingly, not only were “to say and to sing . . . at another time the same thing,” (12.2), in some measure, they must always be the same.

The periodic and measured recurrences of rhythm, the melodious inflections of accents caused poetry and music to be born with language, or rather all this was only language itself and those happy climates and those happy times where the sole pressing needs that demanded coming together with another were those that the heart caused to be born. (12.1)

If language implies thought and thought language, then Rousseau suggests here that thinking must be poetic. All language is born of passion, even if the two aspects of language—articulation and communication—issue from different passions. This distinction between articulation born of anger and communication born of tenderness gives birth to another within music between melody and harmony.

Now, it is certainly true that Rousseau is serious about his understanding of melody as more fundamental than harmony and about his criticism of the music—especially the French music—of his time as mistakenly privileging harmony over melody. He repeats this criticism elsewhere at length.²⁵ And it is also true that Rousseau believes it to be a modern mistake not to pay attention to the power of music as morally imitative.

Man is modified by his senses; no one doubts it. But by failing to distinguish the modifications, we confound their causes. We give too much and too little empire to sensations. We do not see that often they affect us not at all only as sensations but as signs or images, and that their moral effects have moral causes. (13.1)

²⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), Chapter 12, ¶ 1; throughout I will indicate the chapter number followed by the paragraph number as, e.g., 12.1. All translations are my own.

²⁵ In, for example, Rousseau's *Examen de deux principes, Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Pléiade, 1959-95) Vol. 5, the entries on “Harmonie,” on “Aristoxéniens” and on “Pythagoréciens” in his *Dictionnaire de Musique* (<http://www.archive.org/details/dictionnairede00rous>), and *Julie, or the New Heloise* (<http://www.archive.org/details/julieoulanouvell00rousuoft>), Part I, Letter 48.

The argument continues by way of an analogy to painting—more specifically a comparison of drawing to melody. While sounds by themselves may please us as do colors, melody is like drawing (*le dessein* may also mean purpose or intention—design) in moving us far more powerfully. Drawing “is the imitation that gives these colors life and soul” (13.1). Rousseau informed us in chapter 2 of the *Essay* that the origin of language is not need but “moral need”—a need that places us in relation to another as a subject and not simply as object (2.3). That we take sensations to be “signs or images” means that we take them to point beyond themselves—to have a design, intent, or purpose. Drawing does this in a way that color by itself does not (although colors do seem to present themselves always as having shapes). Individual colors may please us, but the pleasure they offer is altogether static, fixed, and isolated—it is, so to speak, objective. In putting what is colored in a context, drawing connects one color to another by way of *dessein*—it makes a poetic image.

As, therefore, painting is not the art of combining colors in a manner pleasant to sight, no more is music the art of combining sounds pleasant to the ear. If it were only that, the one and the other would both be among the number of natural sciences and not of the fine arts. It is only imitation that raises them to this rank. But what is it that makes of painting an imitative art? It is drawing [*dessein*]. What is it that makes of music another? It is melody. (13.8)

But what exactly does this mean? In describing the origin of language, Rousseau had said that we do not first sense things in their true form; we sense them through sentiment or passion. Because we see not merely objects but also our own fear, original language gives us fearsome “giants” rather than neutral “men” (3.3). Similarly, drawing gives us not unconnected objects in a world but rather these objects suffused with our powerful reactions to them. Now, melody has this character as well. It may at first seem simply a “succession of sounds” (13.2), but it yields much more than the sum of its parts, for one note sounded in a melodic sequence makes one anticipate the next; it draws us on—makes us want what will follow. Its power is inexplicable apart from the desire that it engenders in us. Once placed in time, sounds thus generate in us something of “the emotion that beautiful paintings [*tableaux*—also scenes, descriptions] cause in us and of the charm of being moved before a suffering [*pathétique*] subject” (13.3). Of course, these scenes may, and frequently do, contain human subjects, but they may also simply be drawings of recognizable objects. Rousseau means to indicate that in presenting us with images of things in our world, things important to us, *les tableaux* imitate not only the world, but tacitly

ourselves too as subjects in the world. As Nietzsche (following Schopenhauer) will later say, music, as “an immediate representation (or image, i.e., *Abbild*) of the will itself,” lets “every painting, indeed every scene of real life and of the world, straight away come forth with higher meaning, to be sure even more so insofar as its melody is analogous to the inner spirit of the given appearance,” displaying “the metaphysical—the thing itself.”²⁶

With typical wit, and disdain, Rousseau opposes melody understood in this way to harmony.

What would we say of a painter sufficiently deprived of sentiment and of taste as to reason in this way and stupidly to limit to the physical [part] of his art the pleasure that painting causes us? What would we say of a musician, who filled with similar prejudices, believed to see in harmony the sole source of the great effects of music? We would send the first to color the woodwork, and we would condemn the other to compose French operas. (13.7)

Rousseau understands harmony as originating in the following way. As wrenched from a living being as a cry or a plaint, sound has a mood attached to it. This mood is expressed by a melody—a tonal continuum or fluid movement—which is then made calculable and codified into a series of discrete notes. These notes, when taken together imply a scale—a series of intervals that, as deriving from a melody that pleases us, “fit together” (the original meaning of the Greek verb, *harmozein*) or harmonize. As fitted to one another, these notes seem always go together. So for example, perhaps we notice that the discrete notes we have designated from the tonal continuum at first number eight before their pitch repeats. Further examination shows us two pairs of notes that seem closer to one another than the others. To reflect this closeness, we divide what we now call the octave into twelve intervals and notice that between each note and the next, with two important exceptions, there are two intervals. Between the third and the fourth notes of our scale and between the seventh and the eighth, there is only one interval. The shape taken by this fixed relation among the notes of our initial melody is a mode (in this case what we call the major mode). As fixed it becomes a compositional tool for us; we invent or notice other melodies in the same mode, and by so doing, tacitly exclude other possible notes (the scale does not have to be divided into twelve intervals) and other possible relations (the minor mode has single intervals between the second and third and fifth and sixth notes in its sequence). We then see that the notes fitting into our mode need not occur in a temporal sequence but can be sounded

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, section 16, paragraph 3, in *Werke in Drei Bänden* (Carl Hanser Verlag: Munich, 1966) Vol. 1, 90. The translation is my own.

simultaneously in certain combinations—perhaps thirds or fifths. These are chords. To sound them, of course, we must abandon our first instrument—the apparently univocal human voice from which the initial melody was wrenched—and so also sever melody from the language of its initial expression. This atemporal combination of sounds in a chord, i.e., harmony, thus, sanitizes melody by cleansing it of the expression of desire that originally gave rise to it. Because the musical expression with which we began is no longer intimately connected to the poetic expression in language in which it was born, we must add lyrics to make song, but the result is hopelessly artificial. The result is similarly artificial when we attempt in the manner of the French music of Rousseau’s time to restore to song the emotion of motion by way of a temporal progression of chords.

But in also giving fetters to melody, it [harmony] takes away from it energy and expression, it effaces passionate accent in order to substitute for it the harmonic interval, it subjects to only two modes of songs [major and minor] what ought to have as many of them as there are oratorical tones, it effaces or destroys multitudes of sounds or of intervals that do not enter into its system; in a word, it separates song so much from speech that the two languages do battle, are at odds, take away from one another any character of truth, and are unable to reunite without absurdity in a passionate subject. (14.6)

Harmony, as presenting us with relations between sounds understood as objects, gives us no access to the subject. In melody notes come together not mathematically as parts of a system, but as an imitation of the inflections of the voice in response to real situations—“plaints, cries of sadness or of joy, threats, moans.”

It imitates the accents of languages, and the turns assigned in each idiom to certain movements of the soul; it doesn’t only imitate, it speaks, and its language—inarticulate, but lively, ardent, passionate, has a hundred times more energy than speech itself. (14.6)

Accordingly with a few exceptions “the art of the musician consists not at all in immediately painting objects, but in putting in a disposition similar to that in which their presence puts it.”²⁷ The difference is that music, unlike reality, frames itself so as to call attention not only to sound understood as noise, but to sound understood as a sign or image.

To the extent that one should consider sounds only by the disturbance that they excite in our nerves, one would not at all have the true principle of music and of its power over hearts. In melody sounds act on us not only as sounds, but as signs of our affections, of our sentiments; it is thus that they excite in us the motions

²⁷ Letter to D’Alembert, June 26, 1751.

[*mouvements*—also, emotions] and the image of which we recognize in them.
(15.1)

In the immediate sequel, Rousseau remarks that when he imitates a meow, his cat first sits up and takes notice, but once recognizing that it is not really the sound of another cat, it sits back down and relaxes. It is thus not the sound that moves the cat but the initial recognition of another cat in the meow. And with the recognition that the source of the sound is a false cat, the cat sits down. This example doesn't seem to add appreciably to the account until we notice how much more it appears to indicate than Rousseau's argument can bear. The first sentence of the *Essay* informs us that "speech distinguishes man among the animals." Shortly thereafter, we learn that speech only arises once one recognizes that one has been recognized by another as "a sentient and thinking being similar to him" (1.2). Is Rousseau's cat such a being? Are all animate beings capable of that "moral need" or passion that consists in the recognition of others as subjects? Is there a music for cats?

Perhaps Rousseau is not altogether serious about his cat, and it is rather meant to serve as an introduction to his account of the obstacles that thwart one human being from recognizing another as a subject similar to him and that prevent human beings from sharing one music. Caribs respond to European music as little as the cat responds to Rousseau's meow. Chapter 14 leads us to believe that melody is somehow more natural than harmony, which only comes to sight when music has been made a mathematical system. But chapter 15 makes clear that melody too is conventional. So passion, i.e., moral need, is natural in the way that language is natural. Both are available only by way of signs, but signs are conventional. It may be the case that the sting of the tarantula is curable only by frenzied dancing, but this requires music that moves us—i.e., our own music. The cure requires *les airs* (tunes or airs), and must understand the *la langue* (language or tongue) if one is to be put in *mouvement* (motion or emotion). The *double entendres* of Rousseau's own language suggest the problem. Our bodies respond physically to causes that are not simply physical. The nerves yield only insofar as they are disposed by *l'esprit* (mind or spirit), "for it is not so much the ear that bears pleasure to the heart as the heart that bears it to the ear" (15.6). On the one hand, Rousseau seems to argue that the superiority of melody to harmony is that melody makes possible the sensing of the subject in the uttered sound. This is what transforms the pleasure that all men feel in beautiful sounds to the utter delight (*volupté*) we experience when these sounds are animated or ensouled by melodious

inflections (14.1). And yet “the songs we like as most beautiful will always touch only indifferently an ear of one not accustomed to them; it is a tongue [*langue*] for which it is necessary to have the Dictionary.” This is the serious version of the problem of Rousseau’s cat. Melody animates sound only by way of convention. Music is a language, and as itself a language cannot be the source of the sensing of the subject that makes language possible in the first place. It is true that melody is closer to nature than harmony, which in regularizing and systematizing sound treats it as a pure object and detracts from what it is that wrenches sound from us. Melody, on the other hand, does not cut the sound continuum but seeks to reflect it as a continuum; it thereby seeks to reproduce not sound as pure object but sound as wrenched from a subject and so expressive our interest in the world. And yet, Rousseau cannot deny that melody too is conventional. It is an already mediated representation of the subject.

There is a further curiosity in Rousseau’s account. In chapter 13 we came to understand melody on the basis of an analogy between music and painting according to which sounds detached from the subject would be like colors without drawing—“melody does precisely in music what drawing [does] in painting” (13.2). How odd then that having completed his story about the superiority of melody to harmony in chapter 15, Rousseau should entitle the following chapter “False Analogy between Colors and Sounds.” The terms of the two chapters are not, however, perfectly in sync. Perhaps painting and music are analogous even though colors and sounds are not, for “the effect of colors is in their permanence and that of sounds in their succession” (16.1). The model for taking in color, then, is looking, contemplating, and wondering “all at once” (16.2). This is not true of sound, which involves a succession in time—in music, a series of different notes that must be synthesized or put together at each moment. This is what melody is. Chords, in giving one all the notes at once, conceal this fundamental connection between music and time. Melody, on the other hand, is not what the spatial image of musical notation makes it seem to be. Its notes are not really spread out over time as though on a line, but rather at each moment all of what came before is consumed in forming an anticipation of what is about to come.

Perhaps Rousseau’s distinction between color and sound anticipates Kant’s account of space as the form of our outer intuition and time as the form of our inner intuition. Still, for Kant, even objects in space are experienced in time. Rousseau’s account abstracts from the extent to which to experience a painting we must work our way through its details sequentially

(as it had earlier abstracted from the extent to which colors, always present to us in surfaces, always have shapes—which, like clouds, we regularly imagine as having *desseins*). Insofar as this is the case, is the distinction between the experience of color and the experience of sound so pronounced as Rousseau would have us believe? While the musician may have the great advantage of the painter (for example, in knowing how “to paint things that one cannot hear”—16.8), nevertheless Rousseau begins the next chapter, “Error of the Musicians Harmful to their Art,” with the sentence “*See [Voyez—emphasis mine]* how everything brings us back without cease to the moral effects of which I have spoken” (17.1). We have been enjoined to “see” a movement. So painting is not so atemporal as it first seems, and music not so temporal?

To see what this might mean, it is useful to return to the beginning of Rousseau’s account of harmony.

The beauty of sounds is by nature; their effect is purely physical. It is the result of the coming together of different particles of air put in motion by the sounding body, and by all of its aliquots, perhaps to infinity; all together give a pleasant sensation: all the men in the universe will take pleasure in listening to beautiful sounds; but if this pleasure is not animated by the melodious inflections with which they may be familiar, it will not be at all delectable [*délicieux*], it will not change itself into utter delight [*volupté*]. (14.1)

Our pleasure in sounds is thus not simply a pleasure in hearing a single pure note for

A sound carries with it all its concomitant harmonics, in the relations of force and of interval that they must have among them in order to give the most perfect harmony of this sound itself. Add to it the third or the fifth or some other consonance, and you do not add it, but you redouble it; you leave the relation of interval but double that of force: in reinforcing one consonance and not the others, you break the proportion. In wanting to do better than nature, you do worse. Your ears and your taste are spoiled by an ill understood art. There is naturally no other harmony at all than unison. (14.3)

The unity of sounds given to us in nature is actually a “natural harmony.” If one thinks of a sound as the result of a vibrating cord of a certain length, when plucked it will generate not only a sound with a frequency the length of this vibrating cord, but also overtones—concomitant harmonics. These are the sounds generated by the vibrations of aliquot parts of the original cord—the parts perfectly divisible into the cord by a whole integer with no remainder.

Accordingly any “single” sound will be accompanied by natural thirds, fifths, twenty-thirds, one hundred thirteenths, and so on—presumably to infinity. What we call “unison” is thus in reality an ordered, but infinite, multiplicity. This multiplicity affects us pleasantly, but we are

nevertheless generally unaware of its existence. “We give too much and too little empire to sensations.” (13.1).

Rousseau announces the origin of music in melody; it and not harmony is what is first wrenched from us by nature. But what exactly does this wrenching consist in? What is it that moves us to sing? We are told that melody imitates plaints and cries, but of course plaints and cries are painful, and even when an imitation of the painful, melody gives rise to a sweet sentiment, to *volupté*. Rousseau has made very clear how we give too much empire to the senses insofar as we make sound by itself the source of the pleasures of music that can only arise out of the wedding of sound with passion understood as moral need—a need that connects us to another subject. But how is it that we give too little empire to the senses?

If “verses, songs, and speech have a common origin” (12.1), *The Essay on the Origin of Languages* is about this origin. In the part of the *Essay* explicitly concerned with music, Rousseau seems to suggest that music, like language, is subject to a natural decay. Language—initially spoken, poetic, and tonally accented—has a natural tendency to aim at a precision of articulation that so celebrates the “objective” that it ends by rendering the subject invisible and thereby, ironically, becomes less objective. Music moves from continuous melody (in which the subject is in its way the object), to melody (analyzed into discrete units of pitch—i.e., notes), to scales as the systematic temporal sequence of discrete units implied by these notes), to keys (understood as their atemporal collection), to harmony (as the pleasing atemporal relations of notes within a key), and finally back to an all but denatured melody (whether understood as a progression of chords or as a combination in time of now discrete units of pitch). Rousseau’s account of the tendency in his time to value harmony over melody is therefore the history of a decline.

The study of philosophy and the progress of reasoning, having perfected grammar, took away from language this lively and passionate tone that had at first rendered it so songlike. (19.2)

As Rousseau goes on to locate the date of this decline in the 5th century B.C., one is forced to wonder about his scathing indictment of contemporary French music. Could the decay of music, and for that matter of language, be all but coeval with the origin of music? And just as Rousseau relies on written versions of Homer’s sung poems to judge the spoken word more poetic and more musical than the written word (6.1-2), perhaps it is possible that we are less removed from

the Greeks than he first seems to indicate. In the manuscript of the *Essay*, the title of chapter 18 is “That the Musical System of the Greeks had no Relation to Ours.” Editors regularly change the tense of “had” so that it reads “has.” But, of course, after Rousseau finishes his chapter, he has articulated a fairly clear relation between the two systems. Because the intervals of the Greek scale are smaller than ours, they can more closely approximate the intervals of speech. This seems to make it possible for song to remain closer to its origin in speech, and so, more natural. In his rather complicated comparison, Rousseau must indicate how to translate the notes of the Greek system into something available to a modern reader—into the system of modern music. Otherwise his account would be altogether unintelligible. Perhaps, then, he means to indicate by his title that prior to this chapter the two systems *had* no relation, but that now they do. If so, he would have indicated that, while the music of one people may be all but unrecognizable to another people, this “all but” is a rather important qualification, one pointing to some ground that the two share. Is there some common ground where music is, on the one hand, always in decay, and on the other hand, never altogether so corrupted as simply to be severed from its origin?

But what exactly is this origin? Without our “initial” experience of overtones, of the concomitant harmonics of each sound, without the harmony of unison, melody would be impossible. If passion wrenches cries from us, we must still recognize their musicality. We delight in the way sounds go together. Ironically, however, if we treat this “togetherness” as a static relation among fixed objects—that is, if we treat it as harmony is conventionally treated, as though it were the music of the spheres—we have no way of experiencing the true power of the togetherness of these “objects.” For that we need to experience how one note wants another, which in turn wants another. To understand the true “empire of sensation” it is necessary for us to put these “isolated moments” into time, for otherwise we cannot experience the power that attaches them to one another, and hence cannot experience them as they are. Grasping them in their true atemporality requires that we grasp them temporally; otherwise the longing embedded in them is closed to us.

It is true that melody is more fundamental than harmony, but only because genuine harmony would require grasping the truth of sound that is only revealed sequentially in melody. Without this original atemporal harmony of unison, melody would be inconceivable; yet this atemporal harmony of unison can only be experienced temporally. It is rather like the sweet

sentiment of one's own existence, without which our passion to preserve ourselves is unintelligible, but which nevertheless can only be experienced as a longing to return to a lost perfect natural state. The *volupté* of melody has precisely this character of a unity unfolding in time, complete at every moment insofar as the past movement of the melody is always assimilated and made sense of in the present moment, and yet incomplete at every moment insofar as the anticipation of what will come next is also built into the present moment, and yet "complete" only insofar as it is incomplete, for there would be no unity of the melody without the yearning present each moment. It is, therefore, a perfectly understandable blunder that in an attempt to articulate this unity, one would isolate its parts, understand their mutual relations, and articulate the principles that bind them together. Such musical cosmology, call it harmony, is bound to fail, however because in articulating what wrenches melody from us as an object, its character as wrenching fades from view.

Let us return to the pregnant sentence that all but begins the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.

As soon as a man was recognized by another for a sensing being, thinking and similar to him, the desire or the need of communicating to him his sentiments and his thoughts to him made him seek the means for it. (1.2)

As we have seen, the remark suggests that for language to originate we must be somehow capable of sensing that we are being sensed—of experiencing a subject as a subject and not simply as an object. Put differently, language, like music, assumes an extra-linguistic context that must be, on the one hand, assumed and, on the other, can only be articulated temporally even though it cannot finally be understood as temporal. This is what it means for language, and so reason, to be necessarily poetic, and so musical.

The argument of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* is intimately connected to the argument of his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*. We are political only insofar as we are rational, and our rationality is inseparable from language. The character of the origin of political life thus depends on the origin of speech, which in turn depends on the origin of music. In the *Discourse* the meaning of this origin depends on the status of the state of nature, a status, of course, much disputed. Did the state of nature ever really exist, or is it only a logical construct? Is the book about the temporal origin of inequality or about its logical foundations? And if the latter, why does Rousseau persist in creating the

illusion of a temporal unfolding? This issue is clarified somewhat by the note to the first sentence of Rousseau's Preface. Having declared the most useful, but least advanced, human knowledge to be self-knowledge, Rousseau glosses his claim with a quotation from Buffon, who argues that we are not designed for self-knowledge, but rather know everything else better than we know ourselves. We are meant to know objects, not subjects. Nature designs us to "seek only to be spread without and to exist outside ourselves."²⁸ Our "internal sense," what separates us from all that is not part of us, is responsible for such self-knowledge as is available to us. What, however can this internal sense sense? If we are essentially beings who extend ourselves beyond ourselves, if we are to sense ourselves we will have to sense ourselves in the act of sensing other things. Only then will we grasp ourselves as subjects. Our internal sense, as necessarily derivative, can never sense our sensing purely. Any sensing of sensing will always be reflective; self-knowledge will always be second hand—indirect.²⁹ Rousseau argues that self-knowledge is so little advanced because the self (here the soul) is like the statue of Glaucus, so long in the sea that it was disfigured by various accretions. In the passage of Plato's *Republic* to which this seems a reference (611b-d), it is soul's association with body that obscures its true nature. Rousseau indicates this too when he refers to "the changes happening to the constitution of bodies."³⁰ He, therefore, agrees with Buffon, whom he has just quoted as saying

"How to disengage our soul, in which it [the internal sense] resides, from all the illusions of our mind? We have lost the habit of using it; it has remained without exercise in the middle of the tumult of our bodily sensations...."³¹

If body is what is responsible for obscuring the soul, then mustn't body be stripped away in order to make self-knowledge possible?

At the same time, Rousseau identifies the corruption of the soul with the fact that it no longer acts "always by certain and invariable principles."³² Apparently our corruption is connected to our unpredictability—our freedom. The mixture of body and soul that leads to the

²⁸Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Editions de Seuil: 1971), Vol. 2, 248.

²⁹Rousseau, of course, makes this point in a note and relies on an external authority—Buffon—to make the argument for the primacy of inner sense.

³⁰*Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 2, 208.

³¹*Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 2, 248.

³²*Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 2, 209.

corruption of reason by passion and of understanding by delirium is at the same time the birth of our humanity. This is confirmed in what follows.

It is easy to see that it is in these successive changes of the human constitution that it is necessary to seek the first origin of the differences that distinguish men, who, by common avowal, are as naturally equal among themselves as were the animals of each species before diverse physical causes had introduced in some of them the varieties that we notice there.³³

Now, when exactly is it that all men, dogs, etc. are equal by common avowal? Rousseau seems to imply that equality exists within species only when they are pure. Yet Rousseau admits of a "natural or physical" inequality among men and other animals.³⁴ Equality within species would seem to exist only prior to their members having bodies—that is, logically, in the way all common nouns refer to the same thing by "common avowal." Accordingly our "natural equality" is something we discover only in the act of losing it, and we lose it upon being embodied. We lose it at the moment of birth.

Like the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* must make an appeal to a logical state as though it were temporal. This is necessary because our natural state must be one in which we are both untroubled by the feverish living outside ourselves characteristic of *amour propre* and yet, curiously, aware of our own contentment. It is not an accident that in the *Discourse* (as opposed to the *Reveries*), this awareness is called *amour de soi-même*—love of oneself; it is difficult to conceive of it as love of *myself* without turning into *amour propre*. By temporalizing our fall out of the state of nature, Rousseau makes it possible to present this state as, on the one hand, a state of perfect contentment, and, on other hand, an object of deep longing. Yet the contentment is only intelligible in light of the longing. The object in view is not temporal, but it is not sufficiently animated until becoming part of a temporal sequence, where it can be seen not as an object, but as an object of desire. This presentation of a state of perfect harmony that only comes to sight as genuinely harmonious by way of longing, is of course what Rousseau means by melody. Melody is the sign of the necessarily temporal, musical, and poetic character of

³³ *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 2, 209.

³⁴ *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 2, 211.

thought.³⁵ Rousseau writes as he does—regularly presenting logical movements as temporal—because he understands this to be the very nature of thinking—what one might call the music of reason.

Before Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, it is fair to say of Rousseau that he understands music to be an attempt at a direct representation of the human soul. It seems fair as well to say that he thinks that music cannot fully succeed in its attempt to provide this privileged access to the subject as subject. Music both represents one pole of all language (communication) and itself embodies both poles of language (communication and articulation). It is an indeterminate dyad. Music begins as continuous melody—it both renders and creates a mood, and in doing so seems to communicate not an object in the world but a state of inner being. But a song, once sung, has a form of its own. It cuts pieces from the sound continuum. The pieces go together not just for this melody but generally. The system that this implies is a scale of discrete notes, which once cut off from the temporal continuum, make harmonic combinations possible. This movement to a mathematical representation of music as a system of ratios repeats in its way the movement from spoken to written language. Both involve a tendency toward measure and objectification that involves a certain degeneration. For language to work, what is internal, subjective, must become identifiable and hence regular and repeatable. This requires severing it from what gives rise to it, which is by nature irregular and unrepeatable. Language thus has a built in principle of its own degeneration. It is born from the longing to communicate, but the communication of any object requires that I “first” communicate myself as subject. To do so means making my passion available to another, and this means making it shareable, regular. But to regularize it, to objectify it, is to destroy it. To communicate sentiment would require the communication of the “I,” but to make the “I” an object is to conceal its nature. The natural tendency of language to become rule governed as we become progressively more self-conscious of our behavior separates from language the living, passionate tone that at first makes it show itself as singing. Rousseau,

³⁵ This melodic character of thought has something to do with why Aristotle makes story or plot the soul of tragedy (*On Poetics* 1450a38) as well as with the fact that Plato writes dialogues. The goal of thinking is to articulate the connections among things, but these connections show themselves fully only by the ways in which things invite, or even seduce, us into thinking other things. Oedipus’s error at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus* has, as Sophocles points out in his language, the same structure as his initial error. He unwittingly seeks to replace his father and become his own cause. Yet one does not understand the play until one works through what the difference is between the two moments and sees precisely how one leads to the other.

again before Nietzsche, gives this tendency a name. It is philosophy that kills music (19.2).³⁶ At first the music grew from the words and then becomes independent; when they are finally put back together the result is altogether artificial. The story of the degeneration of music and language seems to have the character of a round which is forever repeating itself.

The longing to communicate the subject ends by completely hiding the subject from view. In music melody leads to harmony and harmony to scales or modes in which the range of melody is restricted. Harmony then gives rise to harmonic succession—harmony set out in time—as a new sort of “melody.” In this way, convention builds on convention until the original musical impulse is all but obscured. This is the way languages too develop. The *Essay on the Origin of Languages* is not about the origin of the first language; it is rather an account of how a conventional plurality comes to be naturally from one natural source. Rousseau articulates a tension within the very act of speech—communication versus articulation—and then shows us how it works variations on itself in a natural process of degeneration into a variety of possibilities. It is a degeneration that does not occur once; wherever there is language, it is already in decay. Given what it is, language must always lose the reality it seeks to render. The questions What part?, How much?, In what way? are worth asking, for by answering them we come to understand the particular character of particular languages. And the particulars prove important. While Rousseau almost always overstates his case (remember his praise of Homer), he does believe that the flattening of language and the regularizing of music do occur and do have consequences. Most important, they make it more difficult to sense what it means to be a subject. And the objectification of the subject in speech and the loss of its expression in music are preludes to political subjugation.

Rousseau had identified the languages of the north with the expression *aidez-moi*, which he distinguished from the characteristic expression of those of the south, *aimez-moi* (10.3). What is especially interesting is that both of these, as imperatives, do not seem to fit very well within the dual structure of language as articulation and communication. Imperatives are expressions of will in which a subject makes itself known as a subject. In chapter 5, Of Writing, Rousseau had speculated in a note about punctuation as a solution to the problem of the enervation of writing. As an example he asks about the possibility of introducing a mark for the vocative “to

³⁶ As we have seen, however, this murder is a very old crime. Rousseau cites a passage preserved by Plutarch from a 5th century BC comic poet, Pherecrates, in which Music complains bitterly about the new relation between poet and symphonist.

distinguish through writing a man whom one names from a man whom one calls” and identifies this equivocation as “the same that is found in irony when accent does not make itself sensed” (note to 5.13). Speaking of someone as an object can be confused with speaking to him as a subject. This problem, however, is not really to be resolved by punctuation, for without the proper tone, one might mistake an ironic vocative. In direct address, we sometimes (or more precisely always in part) not only speak *to* someone but also comment *on* him by the way in which we speak to him. This is once more the dyad of communication and articulation, and it reappears in the imperatives characterizing north and south. *Aidez-moi* looks at first like a command, but its content makes clear that it must also be a request, for if one is in need of help one is not in a position of simple command.³⁷ *Aidez-moi* is at once an expression of will and an expression of the imperfection of will. *Aimez-moi* is similar in this regard, for, love cannot be commanded. It only makes sense when addressed to another subject, but a subject completely under one’s control is no longer a subject. As *aidez-moi* points to an objective limitation in the subject speaking, *aimez-moi* points to an objectification of the one to whom one is speaking. The irony of the second person imperative is thus that it represents something quite impossible. One might say that all imperatives are really third person imperatives of the form “let there be x,” for pure will would only manifest itself in overcoming all opposition in the object of its will and doing so by virtue of its will alone. The flawed imperatives of north and south are thus signs that language cannot combine perfectly articulation and communication; we wish to emulate God’s imperative—his combination of word and deed in the creation, but in us word and deed never combine so seamlessly. This is not unimportant for Rousseau, for it indicates the self-consciously problematic character of the center of his political philosophy, the general will. That we are always split between active and passive, citizen and subject, law-giver and follower of the law, is the sign that we are never altogether whole. For Rousseau, the human will must always manifest itself as at odds with itself. As there is no pure willing, there is no pure individual. The tension within language that divides north and south, a tension that shows itself in the distinctively flawed imperatives that characterize each, points to the irresolvability of the political problem to which Rousseau turns at the end of the *Essay*.

³⁷ Here Rousseau has anticipated Nietzsche’s interpretation of the first sentence of the second essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

In his final chapter Rousseau laments the unmusical state of the French language. Unlike the languages of antiquity, it is not suitable for public oratory; is not a language “conducive to freedom”—to exhort men to noble deeds. It is a language “made for the buzz of the Sultan’s council chambers³⁸” (20.2). Nevertheless, Rousseau finds it possible to conclude with this.

But I say that every language in which one cannot make oneself understood to the people assembled is a servile language; it is impossible that a people live free and that it speak that language. (20.3)

In a rhetorical flourish written in French, Rousseau exhorts his readers to freedom. His written oration “proclaim[s] in the ear” (20.3) that however serious he is about the degeneration of modern language, he is always equally aware that language can never be altogether shorn of its double nature. Wherever language is present, the subject is present in however attenuated a form. And a subject is in its very nature a free being. Like all of Rousseau’s writings, the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* is at once a celebration of human freedom and an acknowledgment that perfect freedom is beyond our reach.

Rousseau writes a book on the origin of languages and at every stage seems to exaggerate the character of his argument. There is, for example, no such thing as a purely gestural language, no such thing as proper non-poetic speech, no such thing as the utter flatness of writing, no such thing as a simple language of need or a simple language of passion. Why then the appearance? Rousseau’s essay means itself to be an example of the way in which language shows its poetic power in the very act of generating objects that will ultimately threaten to obscure the power that generated them. This, I think, is the consequence of the nature of soul which must always conceal itself in its attempt to show itself and reveal itself in this very concealment.

³⁸ The word that translates as “Sultan’s Council Chamber” is *divan* and can also mean “sofa.”