

Herder: A World that We Each Create by Ourselves

by

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Class of 2017

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters
and with Departmental Honors in German Studies

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Acknowledgements

I cannot thank Martin Bäümel enough for taking the time to work, understand, explain, and argue with me these last two years. It is thanks to you that I have discovered Herder and Kant, and become truly interested in the philosophy of the German Enlightenment. I must admit that I set out to write an entirely different thesis from the one that I ultimately produced, and it is not because I had an extreme change of heart, but it is thanks to your willingness to show me where I am wrong, where I do not understand, where I need to ask for help. It is only thanks to your constant help in making sense of the materials, that perhaps I too brashly deposited myself into, that I am able to say that I have produced a complete and comprehensible thesis. You have been more giving as an advisor and mentor than I could have ever hoped for. I'm sorry I was, and will undoubtedly continue to be late to our meetings. It is thanks to the kind of inquiry that you have opened me up to that the world outside is so much more full of interesting diversions.

To Jesse Torgerson, my boss, my professor, and my friend: thank you for teaching me to question my previous knowledge, for showing me that the nebulous period “formerly known as the middle ages” is full of so much life, laughter, and knowledge. Pierre Abelard was the rock upon which I built my comps essays, Theophanes has been the door to a new—to me—world of the past that I could not have imagined to be as colorful and captivating. You have taught me, you have employed me, you have given me advice on all things. The CoL would not feel so warm and bright as it is now without your presence.

To Joe Fitzpatrick, who has witnessed my education over the course of all my four years at Wesleyan, and who first taught me how to closely read and analyze a small passage: it is thanks to your help that I have made it through three years of CoL. Without your class, and your help this year, I would not have known how to make any sense of Messrs. Derrida and de Man. I am in your debt, and I promise that I am not trying to make you go easy on me as a reader.

To Tushar Irani, who truly showed me and my peers the ancient world, who brought Plato and Aristotle into my life, and who helped me begin my College of Letters career: thank you for bearing with my early academic stumbles, and for believing in me as a student. Were it not for your help and your ability to bring

Plato to life, I know philosophy would never have become one of my greatest interests.

To Kari Weil and Khachig Tölölyan, the two chairs of the College of Letters who have taught and helped me through troubles both bureaucratic and academic: I am greatly indebted to you on so many counts. My sincerest thanks to the rest of the College of Letters: Eugenia, the professors, and my peers. I am honored to have learned, laughed, and been happy with you all for what has been far too short a time.

To the Department of German studies, and Ulrich Plass, who has so graciously offered to be one of my readers: thank you for providing me an outlet to continue my studies of the German language, of the German culture, and for providing me with a proper introduction to German literature, which has come to entertain me so much.

To the Wesleyan Spirits: House. You are my family away from home. House.

To the Cluster/65 Pearl/264 Court: you have made these last four years at Wesleyan the best four years of my life so far. If laughter is medicine, then I have certainly overdosed.

And most importantly, to Mom, Dad, and Jamie. You have raised me, you have argued with me, you have comforted me, and you have loved me more dearly than it is fair to ask for. Thank you for supporting me through every stage of my life so far. I have missed you more and more each day since I left home the first time four years ago, and I know I could have done none of this without you.

Introduction

Johann Gottfried Herder is not a mind that immediately brings thoughts of the German Enlightenment and linguistic theory to the minds of American students and professors alike. When I first mentioned that Herder was to be the chief focus of this thesis to one of my several advisors, he asked me how it was that I had become so interested in one of the forefathers of the German Nationalist project, and if Nazism was going to be one of the main subjects of my thesis. Herder, a philosopher and philologist of 18th century Königsberg and Weimar knew, argued, and interacted with so many of the great thinkers of the German Enlightenment—Kant, Goethe, Schiller, and Hamann among others—and influenced them and many of their intellectual successors—W. von Humboldt, Hegel, and Nietzsche, to name just the most important. It is this Herder, who, at the first glance has almost completely faded out of discussion in the American philosophical canon, in favor of his peers. It is this Herder, who when I first read him (and encountered him at all, for that matter) in the Spring of my junior year at Wesleyan jumped out at me as having a completely different understanding of human epistemology from the much-better-known Rousseau. An epistemology that seemed to me at odds with the arguments presented by every other philosopher I had ever read. It is this Herder who I thought presented such an amazingly new, to me at least, argument regarding the origins of human knowledge and language, that I immediately ran to tell all of my roommates about the knowledge that was secreted within his *Essay on the Origin of Language*. In

presenting Herder's completely different epistemology to my peers, I was struck by my inability to successfully reproduce the gist of Herder's thought, as the work, which spoke so clearly to me was rejected again and again by my friends, who doubted the possibility of a language that existed internally, and represented concepts non-arbitrarily. Herder again called out to me in the beginning of my Senior year, when I took a class in Critical and Linguistic theory that seemed to me to present arguments that Herder's essay resonated quite closely with. As I began to compare my thoughts on Herder and Saussure, Herder and Derrida, then Herder and de Man, it occurred to me that certain elements of Herder's argument about how language first originates in humans, and what role it plays in our existence, addressed many of the same problems in other 18th century texts that were the foci of these much more well-known 19th and 20th century theorists. It seemed odd to me that all of these theorists who had ideas that seemed so similar to those presented by Herder did not mention him once, when he too addressed the same authors as they did—Condillac, Rousseau, Locke.

Over the course of my research it has become clear to me that Herder, eclipsed by his peers and forgotten by his successors, presents an epistemology that, had it been read by many of the critical theorists of the 20th century, might have circumvented their dealing with some of the more problematic arguments of 18th century French philosophy, which they seem to have taken as representative of all of Western metaphysics. I do not by any means wish to suggest that Herder is a proponent of arguments identical to those of Derrida and de Man, or to suggest that their analysis and criticism is rendered invalid by Herder's arguments.

Instead, I wish to propose that Herder identifies certain issues within the epistemologies of his contemporaries that are different, and in many places propose solutions that the theorists of the 20th century would have applauded for identifying, two hundred years earlier, epistemological problems that they also have addressed.

I would have my readers believe that Herder's relative obscurity is not due to some shortcoming in his philosophical arguments or some weakness in his intellectual acumen. Herder's works beautifully present philosophical matters, and make so many astute observations—that Herder clearly imagines an answer to, but will often playfully not pursue, and leave his reader mulling over—that it is a shame that he has become such an obscure figure in the general Western canon.

In order to understand the significance of Herder's thought, it makes the most sense to begin with the chief targets of his essay, as an examination of their work will best illustrate how different Herder's argument and its ramifications on the human condition are.¹ The significance of Herder's unique and articulate epistemology will only fully reveal itself if we first identify the qualities of

¹ There is a fair amount of research on Herder alone as a philosopher, that examine various elements of his philosophy as representative of a part of the philosophy of the German Enlightenment, and dealing with minutiae of his epistemological argument—see for example Jürgen Trabant, "Herder and Language," within *Companion to the works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler & Wulf Koepke. Camden House, Rochester, New York, 2009. Pp. 117-39. There were no articles that I could find that attempt to use the larger epistemology that is found within Herder's works on a scale greater than this. No authors attempt to take Herder's epistemology out of the environment and time within which it was created, or suggested that it might have ramifications on a modern understanding of language and epistemology.

arbitrariness, presence, and naturalness, which in the *Abhandlung* are represented in a manner that becomes apparent when in direct engagement with Condillac and Rousseau, even though it bears almost no resemblance to their arguments and presuppositions. In discussing Condillac and Rousseau, I will also examine some of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man's works that deal heavily with the two French philosophers. The two theorists' works will allow for a new, pointed examination of Herder's work through the lens of the terminology of 20th century criticism—the qualities of arbitrariness, presence, and naturalness play important roles in Derrida and de Man's own works—and their identification of problematic elements in Condillac and Rousseau's epistemologies. Furthermore, a comparison of Herder and postmodern theory can also illuminate what elements of the latter's analysis become inapplicable if we attempt to view them in relation to Herder's epistemology.²

² There were also a number of articles that attempted to take certain elements of Herder's theory in the *Abhandlung*, and present them in confluence with theory of other periods, but which did so while only focusing on individual small elements of Herder's theory, like the discussion of the linguistic sign which is presented devoid of an explanation of Herder's epistemology in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, "Thinking and Speaking: Herder Humboldt and Saussurean semiotics," within *Comparative Criticism 11*, Cambridge, UK, 1989. Pp. 193-209, (which even suggested that there were some modern philosophers who thought Herder to play no role in the development of German thought after him—pp. 193-194) and Jürgen Trabant, "Language and the Ear: From Derrida to Herder," within the *Herder Yearbook*, ed. Karl Menges et al. Camden House, Columbia South Carolina, 1992.

A Note on References

In the body of the text I will make numerous references to three different essays, the titles to which helpfully begin with "Essay." As a result, referring to each as "The Essay" would lead to a great deal of confusion. In order to maintain clarity, I will refer to Etienne Bonnot de Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* as the *Essay*, Jean Jacques-Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* as the *Origin*, and Herder's *Essay on the Origin of Language* as the *Abhandlung* (The German for essay). Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is only mentioned once, and referred to as Locke's *Essay*.

Condillac and Derrida: An Epistemology of Absence, Presence and Temporal Distance

Initially appearing to be an unlikely individual to grow up to lead a scholarly life, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, born 1714 in Grenoble, suffered from extremely poor eyesight, and a weak constitution. Because of the difficulty reading presented him, Condillac did not begin to read until he was at least twelve years old. Condillac's formal education, initially under the instruction of a local Priest in Grenoble, later at the Jesuit College in Lyons, and finally at the seminary universities of Saint-Suplice and the Sorbonne in Paris, began only in his late teens (Falkenstein, 2010). In 1740, Condillac took holy orders, and was later appointed as the Abbot of Mureau, but never engaged in any pastoral work, and spent his life as a man of letters and as a tutor (Ibid; Arsleff, P.xxxix). Living in Paris from 1733 to 1758, and then again from 1767 to 1773, Condillac became acquainted with many of the intellectuals of the French enlightenment, became close friends with Jean Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot, and was elected to be a member of the Académie Française in 1768 (Arsleff, p.xl). Condillac's two most significant philosophical works, his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746) and the *Treatise on Sensations* (1754), are concerned with human perception and the

development of the intellect.³ Both of these works are developed out of, and continue to refine Lockean empiricism. They present a “radically empiricist account of the workings of the mind that has since come to be referred to as ‘sensationalism,’” a type of empiricism that supposes that the mind begins in *tabula rasa*, or a completely blank state (Falkenstein, 2010). Condillac’s close friend, Jean Jacques Rousseau would later engage with, and further develop, the linguistic theory of the *Essay* in his own writings. The theory of semiotics that Condillac describes is one that, through the attention that both it and Rousseau’s related works would later receive, has been the subject of much debate and criticism since its publication.

In 1746, Condillac anonymously published his first work, the *Essay*, with the assistance of Diderot, who had helped him to find a publisher (Arsleff, p.xxxix). The *Essay* and several of Condillac’s later works refer to and develop the empiricist theories that the English philosopher, John Locke outlined in his 1689 work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.⁴ Condillac praises the work of Locke, and writes in his introduction to the *Essay* that Locke was an exception from other philosophers of the time, and that he “limited himself to the study of the human mind and completed his task with success” (Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, P.6). In the *Essay*, Condillac sets out to both “trace the

³ *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, and *Traité des sensations* respectively

⁴ Condillac’s *Essay* so closely engaged with and discussed Locke’s work that when it was initially translated into English and published by Thomas Nugent in 1756, it bore the addition to the title of “being a supplement to Mr. Locke’s essay on the human understanding.” This thesis will not engage in a comparison of Locke and Condillac except where Condillac himself uses Locke as a foil.

operation of the soul,” and “explore how we have acquired the habit of using signs of all kinds” (*Essay*, P.6). Signs will go on to become the most significant focus of the *Essay* and, as linguistic theory and the related epistemologies are the main focus of my thesis, I will spend the most time addressing this aspect of Condillac’s argument. Condillac’s stressing of the significance of signs is an important moment in the development of linguistic theory, as he is one of the first significant modern linguistic and semiotic thinkers that both fields draw upon.⁵ The *Essay* will argue that the creation of signs “is the most essential [operation] in the search for truth” for humankind (*Essay*, I.4.1.§0). Condillac will go on to attribute a significant proportion of human mental development to the creation of signs, and his arguments concerning their importance to the human place the sign upon a seemingly infallible pedestal.

Condillac decides, despite his praise of Locke’s work that he must “take a new look at perception,” and rectify Locke’s mistakes of spending too little time on the topic of the “origin of our knowledge,” and not addressing the issue of how the mind developed its ability to make sense of, and use perception (*Essay*, Pp.6-7). Condillac’s attempts to elucidate how it is that the mind perceives and processes its perceptions form a complex empiricist epistemology, which in the second part of the text is used to articulate how humans were initially able to conceive of and make use of language.

⁵ I will show that numerous authors in the French canon interact with Condillac’s writings on linguistic theory, and also that Herder will engage with certain aspects of the Condillac that he believes to produce problematic epistemological arguments.

This second part of the text develops on the ideas that Locke articulated in the third book of his *Essay*, where he more or less conceptualized signs as a means to signify internal representations of the soul (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book 3 chapter 1).⁶ Condillac believes that Locke did not do the development of language and words justice, and that they need to “be viewed in a new and more extended manner,” as “the use of signs is the principle that develops the seed of all our ideas” (Condillac, *Essay*, P.8). In the introduction to the *Essay*, Condillac makes apparent one of the driving purposes of the text; his desire to demonstrate that language, which is the human, social, use of signs, is what facilitates, and makes possible complex human thought. With this move from signs as means to signify already formed ideas toward the function of signs in the forming of ideas, Condillac can be considered the founder of semiology, an influential step beyond the reigning epistemologies of the early eighteenth century.

Before we turn to Condillac’s concept of the sign, however, we need to briefly sketch his understanding of the soul’s operations that lead to a conscious awareness of the world. The first portion of the *Essay* provides a lengthy epistemology of human cognitive development. Condillac sides with the empiricism of Locke in deciding that our understanding of the world is universally

⁶ In this simple transfer of already formed ideas to external signs, English empiricism is close to the understanding of signs in German Wolffian rationalism, which also assumes that the soul forms representations that can then be signified at will. For an introduction to Wolff’s semiotics see David E. Wellbery, *Lessing’s Laocoon: Semiotics an aesthetics in the Age of Reason*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1984. Pp.9-42.

traceable back to sensation. According to Condillac, sensations are 'simple thoughts' that are a response to external stimulation of the senses. Condillac explains that as a result of our sensations we "find the ideas of extension, figure, place, motion, rest, and all those that derive from them" (*Essay*, I.1.2.§9). These basic ideas are the creation of the perceived sense within the individual. They are the first conceptualization of sensorial inputs that the mind has perceived, rationalized, and developed into ideas. Condillac imagines that all the senses that the human has are perceived by the mind, but with the caveat that the mind does not remember all of the senses that it perceives, even short moments after it has perceived them.⁷

Condillac, in order to construct an empiricist epistemology that follows after Locke, suggests that there is no sense, which our body can turn into sensation, that we are not conscious of, that we do not perceive. By his epistemology, we are fully aware of every sense that our body experiences at all times. This seems to be a tenuous assertion—indeed, when one is focusing on one kind of sense, or some work, it often happens that we ignore certain senses, and when we come out of that focus they become apparent—and perhaps as a result, Condillac suggests that the senses that we are not aware of were perceived by the conscious mind, but then immediately forgotten. Condillac finally concludes that "we cannot grasp the greater part of our perceptions, not because they were without consciousness, but because they are forgotten an instant later" (*Essay*,

⁷ Sensation is when the body senses sensorial inputs, perception is when the mind is conscious of these sensations.

I.2.1.§13). Condillac creates a constant presence in our human awareness. We must note that Condillac does not even imagine that the human experiences every sense available to them at any given moment and just does not notice some, but rather, that every human perceives at all times, and is aware of all of their senses. There is no moment where the human is alive that she does not know that she experiences every sensorial input as senses running through her.

The articulation of a separation between senses and sensations is significant to Condillac's argument, because he believes that the mind does not remain attentive to all of the sensorial input that it is receiving. Without perception, there is no possibility for our having any understanding of anything, as "objects would have no effect on the senses and the mind would not notice any such action unless accompanied by perception ... the first and least degree of knowledge is perception" (*Essay*, I.2.1.§2). So, Condillac does not suggest that the senses that we forget are not perceived, but simply not conceptualized, and turned into the simple idea of sensation within the mind. Certain kinds of sensorial input affect the mind, but the mind does not actively take notice of them, and for this reason, Condillac argues that "our knowledge properly begins with consciousness and not perception" (*Essay*, I.2.1.§4). As a result, the separation between sense and sensation is just another description of the kinds of perception that the mind participates in. While the body is constantly sensing things, only when the senses are interpreted and formed into a 'simple thought,' does the mind perceive sensation. This perception, "or the impression occasioned in the mind by the action of the senses is the first operation of the understanding" (*Essay*, I.2.1.§1).

Figure 1 below, I believe, more clearly articulates the complicated development from sensorial information to sensation.



Figure 1

The beginning of all human understanding, therefore, is alienated from sensorial information, as perception does not occur concurrently with the encounters that the senses make with sensorial inputs. Sensorial input only becomes something that our mind is aware of in the scenario that it has been received by the senses, and then transformed into a sensation as an idea. While the body is conscious of the information that the senses are producing at all times, we are only aware of these senses when an idea has been formed.

This kind of separation or alienation apparent in the description of the creation of a 'simple' idea is present in many other parts of the epistemology outlined in the *Essay*. For example, Condillac creates distance between the initial 'simple idea,' which represents the mental processing of sensorial information, and the creation of the 'complex idea' which is the unification of 'simple ideas' to form more complicated concepts. It is at this point in his epistemology that signs become an important tool for the forming of ideas. Condillac explains that these 'complex ideas' are only made possible by the use of signs, which "determine the number and variety of properties we have observed" in an object, and allow us to think of objects distinctly and in the whole, as opposed to just a series of different

qualities (*Essay*, I.4.1.§7). Condillac describes the creation of signs as a process whereby the mind acquires “the habit of connecting some ideas to arbitrary signs” (*Essay*, II.1.1.§6). These arbitrary signs serve two purposes: they function as a mental tool both for recalling a compiled series of related sensory information, and, they can be used to create ‘complex ideas,’ which are effectively just a compiled series of related signs. Condillac again stresses what he wished to make clear in the introduction; that the creation of signs “is the most essential [operation] in the search for truth” (*Essay*, I.4.1.§0).

As we can see from this brief summary, the fundamental epistemology that Condillac defines is a series of ever expanding groupings, or combinations of lower level information, that continuously build on top of each other to form ever more and more articulate thought. Sensorial information is perceived and this creates sensations, or mentally articulated sensorial input in the form of ‘simple ideas.’ The different sensations that we have about an object come to us separately, but these ‘simple ideas’ are then arranged by the mind into signs that we use to identify those objects, and the numerous sensations that they create. Individual signs are then used by the mind in conjunction with other signs to create ‘complex ideas’ about objects or qualities. This epistemological hierarchy can be seen in figure 2, below.

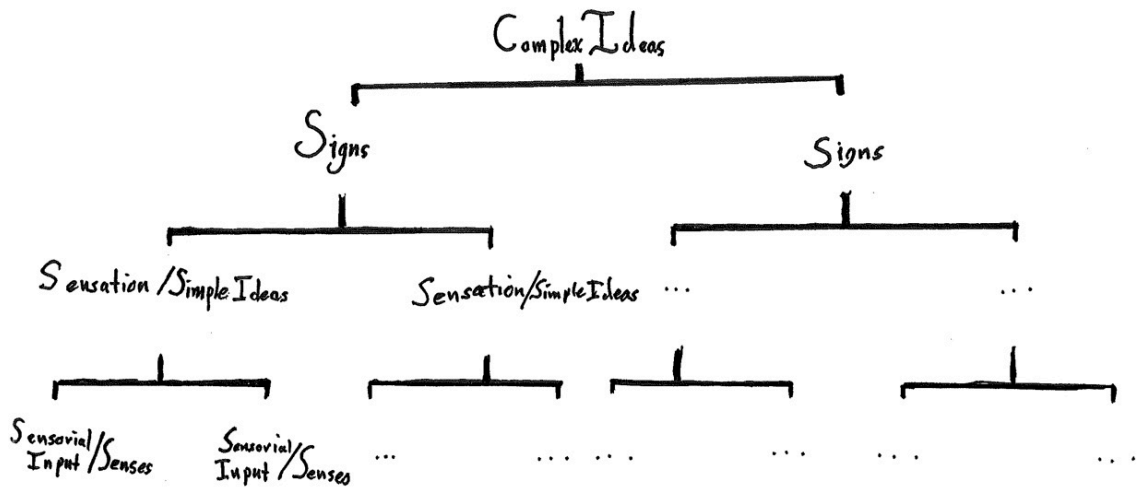


Figure 2

Each of the different levels of information is representative of both a level of complexity of thought, and a capability of further thought that is made possible by the lower level connections that have previously been made. Condillac suggests that each level is only made possible by the level that preceded it, which is to say, for example, that the creation of a sign is only feasible after the perception of sensorial information as sensation, which must be grouped to form the sign itself.

Additionally, the creation of signs, Condillac suggests, is somewhat akin to the creation of language, as signs are tools that our minds use to remember and identify distinct objects and qualities. To articulate this, Condillac explains the production of signs at length by describing the process of their creation in a specific context: our knowledge of numbers and their properties.

§3 Our progress in the knowledge of numbers relies entirely on the precision with which we add unity to itself by giving each forward step a name that distinguishes it from the one before and after. I know that one hundred is superior by one unit to ninety-nine, and inferior to

one hundred and one, because I remember that those are the three signs that I have chosen to designate three consecutive numbers.

§4 It would be an illusion to imagine that the ideas of numbers separated from their signs can be clear and determinate. Only the name to which they are attached can combine several units in the mind ...

§5 Thus there can be no doubt that if someone wanted to calculate privately in his own mind, he would be obliged to invent signs as if he intended to communicate his calculations (*Essay*, I.4.1.§3-5).

So, signs that we create in our minds function like mnemonic tools, which allow our minds to form relationships between objects and thereby create more complex understandings. The mental signs our minds create serve the purpose of articulating these 'complex ideas' in our minds as words do for articulating ideas in conversation. The *Essay* suggests that all of our higher-level thought is made possible by the creation of signs, and the complex thought that it allows us to engage in. Nevertheless, Condillac does not think the creation of mental signs to be equivalent to the creation of language. Here we find another form of absence and distancing in Condillac's epistemology. Words, while they are fundamentally similar to internal signs, require a further step of mental development, as they are represented physically through sounds and gesture (*Essay*, II.1.1.§6).

In creating language and words, we must create a way of referring to objects, phenomena, and sensation with our own body, and in some cases, there may be no logical connection between that which is intended to be signified and that which the signifier is representing—an audible signifier for a mute signified; the spoken word rock to represent the physical rock. The creation of language is representative of another step in Condillac's epistemology, and is one which requires formation of associations made between the signified and the signifier of the sign, which is in turn only understood as an association of a mnemonic tool to

a combination of lower order 'simple ideas.' Only once humans "acquire the habit of connecting some ideas to arbitrary signs" can they then "articulate sounds, and through repetition and gesture apply names to things" (*Essay*, II.1.1.§6, modified). Furthermore, according to Condillac, the process of language creation requires a consensus to occur among a group of people so that the arbitrary signifier for the sign could come to be understood in the same way for more than one person at a time. Condillac explains that language required many people to "pronounce words in circumstances in which everyone was obliged to refer to the same perceptions" (*Essay*, II.1.9.§80).

Here, Condillac determines language to be a fundamentally social tool, and one that can only exist within society, in assuming that language is only truly extant when there is a social group that is in consensus about the meaning of the sounds that form a language. Spoken and gestural words, as they are the association of sounds or gestures that are only arbitrarily related to what they signify, do not have the power to signify for those who are unaware of the convention of their meaning. An arbitrarily formed language only has purpose for those who are able to understand those arbitrary associations that form it.

In Condillac, the distance from consciousness and initial perception to the creation of language is great. There are many steps that occur, and there is a great deal of mental work that is described in the conversion of the raw experiences that we have in nature to the formation of our complex thoughts. Yet despite the many steps, his rigid epistemological hierarchy still firmly anchors all language in

an origin in sensation, in an original presence of body and mind in an encounter with the world.

Finally, while the first half of the *Essay* is a purely philosophical investigation of the development of language, the second half leaves the pure epistemology behind, and imagines how language might have historically developed. The historical development of language, as Condillac conceives of it, is a rigid, awkward attempt which relies on very odd situations and circumstances to portray the development of language. The awkwardness of the historical depiction may be a result of the epistemological difficulties that Condillac avoids or obscures in the first part of the *Essay*. His argument needs to justify a relation between the generative parts and the finished whole of language to mask the slippage of content from sensory experience to language. In order to create this connection, Condillac makes a great effort to suggest that the origins of language are firmly rooted in sensorial stimulation. He suggests that the first words that were formed were probably all mimetic sounds that copied things that humans heard. "The first names of animals probably imitated their cries, ... that also goes for those that were given to winds, rivers, and to everything that makes a noise" (*Essay*, II.1.2.§13). Condillac, so that he may suggest that even the signs that we use are to some degree not arbitrary and irrational stresses this connection between sensation and sign. The attempt to assert a relationship between sign and sensation will be one element of Condillac's argument that was later strongly criticized.

In the second half of the 20th century, there arose a new interest in matters of epistemology, linguistic theory, and semiology, which was largely initiated by Jacques Derrida, and the publication of his landmark text, *Of Grammatology* (1967).⁸ Derrida's *Grammatology* developed the system of linguistics and semiology that had been proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his lectures, and described in *Course in General Linguistics*, and it became a staple in the Western intellectual community, and numerous other linguistic and critical theorists have incorporated Derrida's deconstructive practice into their own theoretical works.⁹ Derrida's *Grammatology* led to a renewed interest in the linguistic theory of Condillac and his intellectual descendants.

Derrida's *Grammatology* is one of the most important works in the development of deconstructive critical theory. Deconstruction of philosophical texts is most significantly occupied with an attention to the internal discrepancies created by Western metaphysics. Derrida believes that Western philosophy has created a series of binaries that mistakenly imply a preference for one element of the binary over the other (the most commonly deconstructed binaries being good versus bad, presence versus absence, spoken versus written). Derrida, in engaging with these binaries, suggests that Western metaphysics' privileging of various sides of the binaries is often problematic and illogical within the framework of the metaphysics itself. One of the basic tools Derrida uses in approaching other texts in his deconstructive work is semiology, the study of representation and

⁸ *De la grammatologie*, first published in English in 1976

⁹ *Cours de linguistique générale*

communication through (arbitrary) language and signs. In particular, Derrida uses Saussure's insight—that the identification of difference and use of qualities of difference is what enables and maintains human use of all signs—to analyze how various texts and theories attempt to obfuscate the lack of an identitarian connection between words and things. In particular, Derrida argues that this lack is overcome by a focus on some form of original presence, a moment in which the separation of word and thing, man and world is overcome. In order to grasp this constant slippage in language's attempt to arrest the things it is speaking of, Derrida coins the term *Différance*, which when read in French, sounds the same as the French *Différence*, but requires the written to be differentiated from the pre-existing French word of *Différence*. Derrida articulates his definition of *Différance* in the eponymously titled chapter at the beginning of his *Margins of Philosophy* (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pp.1-27). Derrida selects this term as an example of the potential for misrepresentation in language that we are often quick to ignore. Through *Différance* "one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *Différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same" (*Margins*, p.17). *Différance* becomes a keyword for Derrida's deconstruction of binaries, and Derrida uses this concept to highlight one of the key arguments in *Grammatology*, which addresses the binary of spoken versus written signs. Derrida suggests that metaphysics has developed a culture that gives preferential treatment to the spoken over the written, with speech

being one of the prominent sites of presence, the presence of the speaking subject.¹⁰ The trend of favoring the spoken argues that written signs are just a way of recording spoken signs, that they therefore must have been developed after spoken signs, and that they are less significant. Derrida, in showing that there can be signs that can only be differentiated from each other in written language, and not in spoken language, reminds us that the preference of spoken over written signs is not always justifiable. Furthermore, if there is no precedence of one form of signification before the other, an argument that prefers the spoken over the written because of its immediacy in proximity to thought or experience is, as Derrida explains, illogical. *Différance* furthermore suggests that within the creation of any sign qua difference to other signs, there is the simultaneous deferral of meaning that pushes interpretation of the meaning of the sign indefinitely onward. Therefore, the creation of the sign inadvertently creates a temporal delay in its interpretation. In *Grammatology*, Derrida reminds that a preference of spoken over written sign serves as an attempt to mask the deferral of meaning in language, by suggesting a presence in spoken language not present in written language. But if the deferral of meaning is present in any kind of language, there is no reason to prefer one of the two over the other. Each has an absence of the initial meaning implicit in its creation. As the sign only takes on the semblance of meaning after interpretation (and even then, never for sure, since it is caught in endless differences and deferrals), and does not physically replace the

¹⁰ Derrida specifically identifies Ferdinand de Saussure in the 1916 posthumous compilation of notes on his lectures, *Cours de linguistique générale*, as a perpetrator of this favoritism of the spoken over the written.

thing it represents in any way, it is simply a substitution for the thing that it seeks to represent. This deferral means that the meaning of the sign is always absent from the sign, and to treat the sign as something truly containing of meaning is a mistake.

Since Condillac was one of the first thinkers to argue that human understanding of the world and use of signs are connected, his work became an ideal site for Derrida's deconstructive readings. Derrida's *The Archeology of the Frivolous*, initially published in 1973 as an introduction to Condillac's *Essay* and later expanded and published alone in 1976, examines the significance of the sign in Condillac's work, and deconstructs the epistemology of the development of sensorial information to 'complex idea' that Condillac articulates.^{11,12} Specifically, Derrida critiques Condillac for arguing in favor of the strong connection between sensual experience of the world and the creation of language, but simultaneously exposing their great separation. He analyzes how Condillac attempts to equate the sensorial encounter with the sign it creates, and does so with the assumption of the presence of reflective, logical decisions that lead to the creation of signs and

¹¹ Translated into English by John P. Leavy Jr. and published in 1980 as *L'archéologie du frivole*, with the sub heading *Reading Condillac*.

¹² The *Archeology* refers to many of Condillac's later texts as well, in order to provide a comprehensive study of the development of Condillac's thinking throughout his oeuvre. The *Archeology* is a text which refers to a variety of Condillac works (including the *Essay* and his later philosophical texts) and some of the philosophical work which immediately follows him in France. I have engaged in a selective reading of the text, only taking from the text the elements of it that will be useful and relevant to the *Essay*, and which are important to the argument about presence and absence in the epistemology that Condillac creates. There are some chapters which as a result of this will be more or less unused in my work. This is not to suggest their unimportance, but simply their irrelevance to the topic at hand.

of 'complex ideas' out of sensorial input. As Derrida shows, this creates a great separation between the creation of language and of sensual experience of the world, yet simultaneously ignores or obfuscates this distancing.

In the *Archeology* Derrida takes Condillac's work to be an attempt to create a new metaphysics, and to generate a case for the importance of signs as the most significant mental tool for the development of metaphysics, and other complex concepts. Derrida's argument begins with a general criticism of the epistemology of the *Essay*, which Derrida refers to as an "*analogic*, which develops a sensationalism into a semiotism," where "sensation is not only a simple element, but also a *germ*" (*Archeology*, p.46). Derrida repeats that the empiricist epistemology of Condillac, which attributes the beginning of all thought to the perception of sensorial information as sensation, thereby proposes that all language is at its lowest level borne out of the sensorial inputs. In Condillac's argument, the sensationalism that directly informs our production of signs is also, through its linear ancestry to the semiotics and language that it eventually results in, made equal to what it produces. This relationship, of a whole found within its part—of semiotics found within sensation—is what Derrida refers to as an 'identical proposition,' a relationship in which the whole is present within the part, or an equation of both sides of the analogy (*Archeology*, p.117). This identical proposition in the Condillac argument attempts to justify the sign, by making it the logically produced descendant of human encounters with sensorial information, by stressing the fact that the sensation is a 'germ' which develops into signs and 'complex thought.'

Problematically, this aspect of Condillac's argument ignores the fact that the sign is inescapably an inaccurate representation of what it seeks to represent, as it is not the same sensory experience. Derrida identifies that Condillac seeks to justify the nature of the sign, by suggesting that it is equal in value to sensory input that produces it, and by remarking that the sensorial input develops into the sign.¹³ This false parity created in the *Essay* ignores the fact that, while the sign seeks to represent something, it does so differently—there is no presence of the initial sensation in the sign, the initial sensation is completely absent.

It is as a result of his acknowledgment of the arbitrary nature of the instituted sign, that it seems to Derrida, that Condillac is aware of this problematic jump from sensation to sign, of the absence in signs. Derrida suggests that Condillac overcomes the absence in the arbitrariness of the sign with the creation of a second kind of presence—the presence of mind in the creation of the sign—that covers up the initial absence. To articulate this second kind of presence in the

¹³ While he spends the greatest amount of time referring to what he will term to be “arbitrary signs” in the *Essay*, Condillac conceives of three different kinds of signs that the mind produces at random and rationally from the sensations that it has created. These are: “(1) Accidental signs, or the objects that some particular circumstances have connected with some of our ideas so that those ideas may be revived by them. (2) Natural signs, or the cries that nature has established for the sentiments of joy, fear, pain, etc. (3) Instituted signs, or those that we have ourselves chosen and that only have an arbitrary relation to our ideas” (*Essay*, I.2.4.§35). While Condillac does imagine that there are some signs that have a kind of co-presence in their representation, like the “accidental signs,” for example, the signs that are most important for Condillac, and the signs that are the basis for language, are the arbitrary signs. In this reference to the instituted signs, Condillac overtly acknowledges their arbitrary relation to the idea that they represent. And nevertheless, in numerous other places in the *Essay*, Condillac still appears to maintain that signs are based in some kind of non-arbitrary presence.

Essay, Derrida cites Maine de Biran, a French philosopher who succeeded Condillac, and further developed his sensationalist theories, in his criticism of the presence that is created by Condillac's epistemology. De Biran writes of Condillac that "he seems to suggest that we produce ideas by an act of our will, and to believe that they are not the results of the movement of brain fibers or something similar" (Maine de Biran, OMB, I, p.213, in *Archeology*, p.57). De Biran is identifying that the epistemology of Condillac, in its rigid hierarchy of different levels of mental development, from sensorial input to complex idea, implies that there is a mental presence in the movement from one level to the other. De Biran reveals that Condillac ignores the possibility that this is a completely involuntary operation of the mind. De Biran shows that the process of development of sensation to 'complex idea' and language described in the *Essay* is one that presupposes autonomy and awareness of our mental processes even at their lowest levels.

Condillac's argument that even the creation of 'simple ideas' or sensation is done by conscious perception points to his attribution of a form of presence in his epistemology, where Derrida sees only an absence.¹⁴ Through the insinuation of presence in the development of thought, the *Essay* seeks to imply a logic behind the primacy of the sign, and seeks to justify the actions of the mind that create the various levels of thought that lead up to the sign. The *Essay* conceives of a world wherein all sensorial input that reaches the human is sensed, and that the human is fully aware of all of this sensation. Condillac wishes to suggest that there is no way that a human could form an incomplete understanding of something, because

¹⁴ See above (pp. 10-13)

she inescapably experiences every sensation associated with, whether she forgets it or not is another issue. The suggestion of presence in human perception that Condillac creates is furthermore problematic, as it can lead the reader to assume a greater proximity between the signifier and the signified. In order to develop and affirm his empiricist epistemology, Condillac attempts to lure the reader into believing in a “semantic identity produced through the difference [Différance] of the sign to the idea; difference of the signifier to the signified” that is not actually present in reality (*Archeology*, p.117). Condillac suggests through his epistemology that the sign always carries with it the complete sensations of the encounter of nature that it originates with.

Condillac does not articulate the semantic identity, he only implies it through his epistemology, and simply defers an explanation of its creation. In suggesting that there is some logic in the development of the sign and of language, Condillac hides a “deviation or gap of the signifier from the signified” which allows him to claim the significance of the sign in the development of human thought (*Archeology*, p.128, modified). This deviation is one that must not be ignored, as Derrida explains, because it is an inescapable reality that “identity in words is frivolous,” and that the sign or the word only has meaning through arbitrary connection (*Archeology*, p.127). The meaning that is attributed to the sign is not created in the same way as the meaning of what the sign represents is created, and as a result, the sign does not reproduce the sensation that it stands in for. Furthermore, the creation of the sign is a process that could just as well be a non-intentional, instantaneous mental process that contains no logic, and to assert a

presence here, as Condillac does, only attempts to cover the fact that there was an absence in the first place.

Finally, where Condillac assumes the mind to have created new things (such as signs and 'complex ideas'), Derrida believes the mind to simply have made decisions unconsciously/without intent, or instinctually, and argues that nothing new has been created. Derrida explains that the *Essay* functions around the assumption that the "*taxonomic element*" of the human mind is a "*germinal power*," which has the ability to generate new information that the human might not ever have experienced (*Archeology*, p.44). Derrida resists the idea that the mind, through use of the imagination (as Condillac believes this to be the capacity that produces new concepts), is able to create new concepts. "The fact is, productions of the new—and imagination—are only productions: by analogical connection and repetition, they bring to light what, without being there, will have been there" (*Archeology*, P.71). Derrida explains that the process of creation, as articulated by Condillac, is nothing more than the discovery of pre-existing things, of thoughts that already existed within the mind. According to Derrida, there is no way to produce something by means of internal mental processes that has not existed within the mind before. The mind creates only by joining previously known or perceived things together, and forming relationships between previous knowledge or perception. Derrida rejects Condillac's suggestion that different sensations are bundled together, and that through the group interpretation of these sensations we produce signs. Derrida also implies that the information that we use to define the sign creates something new. In truth the sign, and the

concepts that are formed by combinations of signs are just labels that are attached to ideas already present in the mind. Condillac wishes to assert that the mind is truly generative, and that the sign is truly a germ for the creation of new things, and ignores that in reality the process is simply an application of an arbitrary label to information already within the mind.

Condillac's desire to endow the application and use of the human mind with a generative property is summarily rejected by Derrida, as he believes that our knowledge is inescapably limited by our ability to perceive. There is no information that the human mind can create that it has not garnered through sensation, through experience of the surrounding world. Where Condillac imagines that our mind creates new, non-perceived information, Derrida reminds his reader that, in fact, this is just our mind reevaluating, reorganizing, and re-terming the information that it has already internalized. In his own works concerning linguistic development, Rousseau will address Condillac's *Essay*, and develop an argument that places a much greater dependence on human experience and sensation, as opposed to a quality of human mental creation that becomes more significant than sensation. While Rousseau will go on to articulate an understanding of human sensation that is more doubtful of the accuracy of perception, Rousseau, and Paul de Man's interpretation of his works, will express the belief that our knowledge is rooted in experience alone, and imagine it to be unlikely that the human can produce any non-subjective, sensation based knowledge, or create anything originally that is not just an interpretation of the senses. As a result, Derrida's argument in the *Archeology*, which objects to

Condillac's suggestion that the human mind can create new knowledge, is similar to one that de Man will address in his analysis of Rousseau. De Man will analyze Rousseau's works and determine that, according to his epistemology, human language and knowledge will always have a metaphorical quality about them. De Man will go on to think differently about what it is that we can do with the realization that our understanding of the world is inescapably limited to our subjective experiences and interpretations of the world around us.

Rousseau and de Man: Errors, Metaphors, and the Creation of Conceptual Language

Condillac's *Essay* was a significant work for the French academy in the 18th and 19th centuries, where it was the subject of much criticism and analysis (at the hands of de Biran, for example). Both Condillac and his theories on the origins of language were well known to the Swiss French philosophe Jean Jacques Rousseau, and not only his own *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, but also his much more influential *Discourse* directly engage with Condillac's *Essay*. Rousseau submitted his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* in 1754 as a response to a prize essay competition sponsored by the Académie de Dijon on the question of « Quelle est l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes et si elle est autorisée par la loi naturelle? »¹⁵ Rousseau, who had competed in, and won, the Dijon prize essay competition of four years before with his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, submitted the *Discourse* in response to this new question. This second essay would eventually fail to win Rousseau the prize, but nevertheless, the essay, colloquially known as Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, has, as a result of its argument concerning the origin of languages, become a significant work in the development of semiotic and linguistic theory. The *Second Discourse* has become one of the most

¹⁵ "What is the origin of inequality among men, and whether it is authorized by the natural Law"

important works of the eighteenth century for its discussion of the development of political and social order in humans. Language only plays a minor role in the text, as it serves only to facilitate the development of an epistemological structure as a basis for the political and social, which are the main focus of the second half of the text. However, as my argument deals predominantly with the development of human knowledge and human language, I will spend much more time discussing the epistemological section at the beginning of the chapter. The epistemology and description of the creation of language is also one of the more important elements of the *Second Discourse* in Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*, which I will later discuss in relation to both the *Discourse* and the *Origin*. However, to understand the significance of Rousseau's text, we must first examine how it is a development on the pre-existing epistemological and linguistic theory that is found in Condillac's *Essay*.

Rousseau and Condillac had been friends for quite some time when Rousseau first published his *Discourse*. The two, only two years apart in age, had met in 1742, when Rousseau was serving as the tutor to one of the children of Condillac's brother, and they had developed a rapport as they were friends and in the same circles in Paris. Condillac was one of the few individuals to whom Rousseau gave a draft of the *Discourse* before its eventual publication (Gourevitch, P.339-40). Rousseau and Condillac shared their thoughts on the matter of the origins of language, and the *Discourse*, published eight years after Condillac's

Essay, references it in many places, both in the body of the text, and in Rousseau's own notes and annotations to the text.¹⁶

Although the *Discourse* may only address the issue of language briefly, we can learn more about how Rousseau understands the development of language, cognition, and society through an examination of his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.¹⁷ The *Origin*, as it was not published during Rousseau's lifetime, but was sent to the printer for inclusion in an ultimately unpublished volume before his death, has a murky history. Rousseau wrote in the introduction of the unpublished volume that was to contain the *Origin*, and a number of other short works, that the essay was initially "but a fragment of the *Discourse* on inequality." Rousseau had decided that it was too lengthy to form an addition to the prize essay, and so he excised it from the *Discourse* for later publication (Rousseau, *Origin*, Pp.360-1). The *Origin* would be first published in 1781. The shorter *Origin*, unlike the *Discourse*, contains very little discussion of the social ramifications of language, and does not contain a similar discussion of how societies have developed in the world. It provides a more in-depth description of the process of language acquisition and usage. Because of the similarities present in the epistemological and linguistic systems described by the texts, and Rousseau's admission that he had initially intended the two works to be just one, it seems reasonable to use the two works in concert.

¹⁶ (*Discourse*, 146, 196, 212)

¹⁷ *Essai sur l'origine des langues*

Although language is only briefly the focus of the *Discourse*, the ramifications of the pervasiveness of language in all human interaction and human cognition allows much of Rousseau's argument regarding social theory in the latter portion of the *Discourse* to be understood through a lens of semiology. "The concepts at work in the political parts of the *Second Discourse* are structured like the linguistic model described in the digression of language. This makes the passage a key to an understanding of the entire text" (De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p.143). Language, while it only plays a small role in the *Discourse*, has significant implications for the rest of the text as a result of its importance to social structure. Because of the suggestion made by Rousseau that language is one of the fundamental building blocks of the human mind and of human society, the *Discourse* has been the focus of significant attention in Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, and Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*.

Rousseau's epistemological underpinnings are much less rigorously defined than Condillac's, but the elements in the *Discourse* that have to do with human development and progress demonstrate certain similarities to the *Essay*. Like Condillac, Rousseau presents an empiricist argument when he suggests that sensation is the origin of all thought. "To perceive and to sense" is the first state of all animals, and reflective thought and the creation of ideas can occur only after the perception of sensory information (Rousseau, *Discourse*, 143). Rousseau states that for all animals—humans included—ideas [*pensées*] are able to exist because we are endowed with senses, and furthermore, that these ideas are "combined" in the mind of the animal to create more complicated ideas (*Discourse*, 141). This

“senses -> ideas -> combined ideas” cognitive development structure is quite similar to the “sensation -> ‘simple ideas’ -> ‘complex ideas’” structure that we identified in the *Essay*.¹⁸

However, where Condillac masked the tenuous nature of the relationship between the sensorial input, the sensation, and the ‘simple idea,’ Rousseau openly admits that the idea may not be an accurate representation or recreation of the initial encounter.¹⁹ Rousseau identifies that the creation of language or signs to refer to an idea is a figurative representation of the sensations that are the point of genesis for the idea, not, as Condillac would have it, an accurate recreation of the encounter with sensorial inputs through logically developed sensation. This relationship is articulated in the more developed linguistic origin story put forth by the *Origin*. Rousseau argues that the “first expressions were tropes. Figurative language was first to be born. *Proper meaning was discovered last*” (*Origin*, p.12 [emphasis added]). This figurative language is a tool for signification, that will come to represent the relationship between the individual and their experience of the world. These sensations, appear rapidly before the mind of the individual, and without rationalizing, she produces this figurative language, this sign that will stand in for her emotion.

¹⁸ The similarity between the *Essay* and the *Discourse* even extends into the terminology that both of the philosophers use in describing the epistemological structures.

¹⁹ Even though Condillac does acknowledge that the majority of signs that we use are arbitrary, he nevertheless suggests the sensation to be an accurate representation of the nervous stimulation that was caused by the sensorial encounter with the world.

One does not only transpose words; one also transposes ideas. Otherwise figurative language would signify nothing. I shall [explain this] with an example. Upon meeting others, a savage man will initially be frightened. Because of his fear he sees the others as bigger and stronger than himself. He calls them *giants*. After many experiences, he recognizes that these so-called giants are neither bigger nor stronger than he. Their stature does not approach the idea he had initially attached to the word giant. So he invents another name common to them and to him, such as the name *man*, for example, and leaves *giant* to the fictitious object that had impressed him during his illusion. That is how the figurative word is born before the literal word, when our gaze is held in passionate fascination; and how it is that the first idea conveyed to us is not that of the truth (Rousseau, p.13).

Here Rousseau describes a process of language creation that in its initial form is a misrepresentation of what it is supposed to stand in for, or as he calls it, is 'figurative.' In the analogy, the person that encounters another human for the first time initially succumbs to her emotions, to a fear of the other human, and applies a sign to the feared other of 'giant.' This initial figurative term is a misrepresentation for Rousseau, because it is representative of an inaccurate perception of the encounter. 'Giant' represents qualities that are subjective, accurate only for the person that creates them—the fear causes the person to see them as larger, as stronger, and as dangerous, while in reality the other person may not possess any of these qualities—and inaccurate for any other viewer. This creation of the figurative term "displaces the referential meaning from an outward, visible property to an 'inward' feeling (*Of Grammatology*, p.393). Rousseau here, unlike Condillac, imagines that our sensations are not infallible, that they both misrepresent and are misrepresented in the mind.

By means of the giant analogy, Rousseau reminds us that we must be conscious of the potential inadequacy of signs that is a result of misrepresentation

of the initial encounter. But nevertheless, the figurative language that is created by the initial, emotional, interaction is a near, if not perfect reproduction of the individual's subjective understanding of the encounter. "The forms of the [first] tongue would be images, feelings, and figures ... it [the first tongue] would correspond to its initial object, presenting to the senses as well as to the understanding the almost inevitable impression of the feeling that the tongue seeks to communicate" (*Origin*, pp. 15). Initial figurative language is a perfect representation or recreation of a subjective understanding of an encounter.

In the transition from the use of 'giant' to 'man' we see the epistemological development from figurative misrepresentation to literal representation as it is defined in the *Origin*. Rousseau does believe that after the initial figurative misrepresentation, the human is able to apply their mind to create a conceptually more accurate linguistic representation of the sensations. In the giant analogy, a term of 'man' is created, which Rousseau believes is a more, if not completely, accurate, rationally oriented term. The 'literal word' that is produced by the realization that the figurative word is an inaccurate representation of the perceived object is representative of a truer meaning according to Rousseau. The rational mind, as opposed to the heart—the seat of emotional/figurative production for Rousseau—, takes over the production of language, and as a result "language becomes more exact and clearer" (*Origin*, p.16). Rousseau believes that language, by means of human discourse, and the rational faculties that are heightened by language in discourse, is able to become more representative of an objective understanding of the world.

Regardless of the fact that Rousseau has argued that human sensation is problematic, and may not perceive accurately, here, he falls back into creating an Condillac-esque epistemology where language has some kind of presence in representation that cannot possibly exist. Rousseau, in suggesting that this later language can convey “proper meaning,” a meaning that represents the true essence of the object, ignores our inability to accurately reproduce sensory inputs through language (*Origin*, p.12). Rousseau does not suggest that the rational mind can access any new information that was not available to it after the encounter with the object that produced the ‘figurative language.’ The rationally produced ‘literal’ language is still a product of the subjective, emotional, individual mind, and the information that produces the ‘literal’ language is still the same sensory information. As a result, the ‘literal’ language still is a figurative re-interpretation of the sensations that we experience, and an inaccurate recreation of it through different means, whether they be spoken or gestural language. Here Rousseau, although he initially disagreed with Condillac in realizing that language is an individual, subjective production, tries to suggest that the mind can create a truly objective language through use of the rational faculties. Use of this language allows humans to tell others things from an objective point of view, and allows for others to truly understand what is being said (*Origin*, p.48). Even though both philosophers acknowledge to some extent the arbitrary, subjective nature of language, both of them resort to arguments that suggest that language can attain some kind of objective truth through manipulation of the rational faculties.

The very manipulation of the rational faculties—to access a figural or a literal/conceptual language, which Rousseau imagines as being more useful for communication and therefore human development—is problematized in both the *Origin* and the *Discourse*. Rousseau will go on to bemoan the loss of the visceral emotional experience that we had in our initial encounter with sensorial information, and the corresponding ‘figural language’ creation. Rousseau believes that the ‘literal’ language that is created after the metaphorical language is a destruction of the “passionate fascination” present in the original non-rational experience. It is a result of the use of the rational mind that language “becomes less passionate ... more prolix, duller, and colder” (*Origin*, pp.13,16). Humans, after they create ‘literal’ language, lose a quality of “original happiness” that they have only in their pre-rational existence (*Discourse*, 142). This ‘literal’ language, unlike the natural sensations and passions that the primitive human and the animal are swept away by, does not captivate the mind of the human like ‘figurative language,’ rather it just functions as a way to accurately convey information. Humans who are rational and use literal language no longer have access to the true emotional language that they first created, and their new language does not contain any of the subjective truth for the individual that was present in figurative language. Rousseau imagines that, through the use of the rational faculties, the human becomes bored with the world around her, and “the spectacle of Nature becomes so familiar that [she] grows indifferent to it” (*Discourse*, 144). Although the natural world, and the natural language is more powerful for the individual, Rousseau does also suggest that through use of the

rational faculties and language our ability to communicate is enhanced at least insofar as representation is concerned. Rousseau argues that “language becomes more exact and clearer” as a result of the process of rationalization that we engage in to turn our initial metaphorical language into a potentially objective language, usable for universal communication (*Origin*, p.16).

Despite this suggestion that the rational language is better for the exact communication of ideas, Rousseau’s preference for the natural language is present throughout the *Origin* and the *Discourse*. Another example of the destruction of the kind of emotional presence signified by ‘figural language’ that Rousseau bemoans, and believes occurs in the creation of the literal, abstract language, can be seen in another analogy that he uses to demonstrate linguistic progression: the Oak tree analogy found in the first part of the *Discourse*.

Every object was at first given a particular name without regard to kinds and Species ... all particulars presented themselves to the mind in isolation, just as they are in the picture of Nature. If one Oak was called A, another Oak was called B; for the first idea one derives from two objects is that they are not the same, and it often takes a good deal of time to notice what they have in common: so that the more limited knowledge was, the more extensive the Dictionary grew ... [however,] every general idea is purely intellectual; if the imagination is at all involved, the idea immediately becomes particular (*Discourse*, 149-50).

Here Rousseau again describes the process by which the mind applies the initial individual and emotional signs to things that it perceives immediately after contact. It is only after some time that the human mind attempts to create new, literal, signs to replace the emotionally oriented figurative signs that it believes to

be more objective. Rousseau stresses that the mind naturally attempts to create individualized, subjective understandings of objects, and that rationalized, non-emotional, unimaginative understandings of objects are fundamentally unnatural. Rousseau valorizes the pre-rational human. In order to justify his preference for the natural, Rousseau suggests that without the rational faculties the pre-rational human still had the ability to be the dominant animal. In fact, Rousseau conceives of the pre-rational human as “the most advantageously organized of all” animals (*Discourse*, 131). Rousseau demonstrates a desire for a return to the natural existence of the pre-rational human, and maintains that, even in her natural state, the human could succeed. Throughout the essay, Rousseau maintains that the animal, natural experience of the world is one that is better than the human, rational experience.

Another difference that separates Condillac and Rousseau can be found in how they conceive of the step that leads to the creation of more complex or combined ideas. Although both Rousseau and Condillac are aligned in their understanding of the significance of sensation to the origins of thought, Rousseau’s understanding of the role that signs play in thought development differs. Rousseau imagines that, because we as humans are capable of much more complex thought than animals are, we must have some further mental capacity to allow us to create these more complex thoughts. “The more one meditates on this subject, the greater does the distance between pure sensations and the simplest knowledge grow in our eyes” (*Discourse*, 144). The difference between Rousseau and Condillac lies in how the mind utilizes the sign. Although Condillac imagines

that the sign exists internally as a tool that the mind uses in the development of more complicated thought, Rousseau suggests that the development of complex ideas is a process that is only capable after the production of external signs, the production of language. Rousseau, because he more strongly identifies the similarities in the basic mental capacities of the human and the animal (both the natural human and the animal create ideas out of sensation, and combine them to form simple ideas) suggests that one, easily identifiable difference between the human and the animal is the point of genesis of the difference in their cognitive ability. This different faculty, he believes, is communication through language. Rousseau claims that it "is inconceivable how a man could, by his own strength alone, without the help of communication have crossed the wide divide that separates sensation and even the simplest knowledge" (*Discourse*, 144). While Condillac imagined that the most complex thoughts could arise internally, through manipulation of the simple ideas and signs that our mind was aware of, Rousseau suggests that the development of the complex ideas that the great repository of human knowledge consists of required the sharing of external signs. According to Rousseau, the use of speech is the point of genesis for many of our ideas, and the tool that we use to develop our knowledge to newer and greater heights (Rousseau, 146). Without speech, the rational capabilities of mankind would simply go untouched, and as a result, humans would not develop. We would be just like animals, and after a thousand years, there would be no change in how humans lived or associated with one another, and we would be just as we were "in the first year of those thousand" (*Discourse*, 142). Rousseau does not imagine

that the human population would have developed out of its natural state without the use of the rational mind, which is accessible through the use of language.

So, what is it that has caused humans to create this loss, to create abstract language? Rousseau suggests that it is the very demands made on humans by other humans that forced humankind out of their natural existence. Once humans encounter one another, in forming relationships they depart from the natural, self-sufficient environment that the “natural human” had lived in. The relationships that formed between humans both demanded and facilitated the creation of this communicative abstract language.

This aspect of Rousseau’s argument is representative of the point at which Rousseau truly moves away from Condillac in his philosophy of the development of human language. Rousseau identifies that Condillac’s argument in the *Essay* presupposes the existence of a social relationship between humans at the point of language creation. Condillac imagines that children in the desert would naturally associate with each other, and, wanting to share their feelings, develop language (Condillac, *Essay*, II.1. §§1-7). Alternatively, Rousseau suggests that language is what initially allows for social interaction, and more complicated human relationships, and, as a result, society could not have existed prior to the creation of language. Rousseau argues that humans could not have understood the significance of social interaction prior to the existence of it, and because social groups can only interact after the creation of some tool to facilitate social interaction—like language—Rousseau believes it impossible to suggest that language could have been born within a pre-existing society.

As a result of this, in the Rousseau, the creation of language, which is the key to more complex thought, is simultaneously the creation of social relationships. Language, for Rousseau, both allows for, and through its usage creates social relationships among humans. Furthermore, the developed, knowledgeable human exists only because her knowledge has been made possible by the exchange of ideas and sensations through language. One ramification of this structure, wherein all social relationships between humans are dependent on the use of language, is that the same epistemological development that exists to facilitate the creation of language must also be found within the creation of social and political structures. If all societies are based on the acquisition and subsequent usage of language between humans, then any criticism of the structure of language will also be a criticism that has similar implications for social and political structures. It is this very issue that Paul de Man will analyze and examine in his own work with the *Discourse* and the *Origin*.

De Man, a contemporary of Jacques Derrida, and a prominent critical theorist in his own right, will pick up on certain themes of Derrida's analysis of 18th century philosophical work on linguistic theory and epistemology, some of which we have seen in the *Archeology*. De Man develops the arguments that we have seen Rousseau make in a new way through his own text, *Allegories of Reading*, first published in 1979, twelve years after Derrida first published his landmark work on critical theory, *Of Grammatology*.²⁰ De Man openly

²⁰ Derrida appears referenced by name seven times in the *Allegories*, and *Grammatology* is referenced specifically three times (pp. 139, 150, 180).

acknowledges that he uses Derrida's rhetoric and terminology in several places in his text, and reminds his reader of this in the introduction to the *Allegories*.²¹ De Man does identify the issue of Derridean absence/presence in the works of Rousseau and thinks of the various binaries in the text in a deconstructive manner, however, de Man also addresses certain issues that Derrida either fails to acknowledge, or has no interest in. Through the *Allegories*, de Man continues to engage with the deconstructive rhetoric that Derrida has outlined in *Of Grammatology*. De Man explains in the preface of *Allegories of Reading* that over the course of the text he intends to address a "problematics of reading," by means of a first part which engages with a diverse group of authors and texts, and then a second part that focuses on the canon of Rousseau. De Man uses these texts so that he can develop an argument that demonstrates how the linguistic structuring of a text and its epistemological aspirations are intricately intertwined (De Man, *Allegories*, p.ix). In the second half of the book, de Man spends a great deal of time discussing the linguistic and social theories that are present in the works of Rousseau, most specifically in the *Discourse* and the *Origin*.²² De Man will go on to

²¹ De Man writes "I consciously came across 'deconstruction' for the first time in the writings of Jacques Derrida, which means that [use of 'deconstruction in *Allegories*] is associated with a power of inventive rigor to which I lay no claim but which I certainly do not wish to erase" (*Allegories*, p.x).

²² Like Derrida's *Archeology*, de Man's *Allegories* argues a wide variety of claims. The first part, and the majority of the second part of the text will produce a lengthy argument about reading, and de Man will draw on numerous Rousseau works. Much of de Man's text will go unused in my work, which is not to discredit, or show my disagreement with it. I have engaged in a selective reading of the text, only taking from the text the elements of it that I believe will be useful and relevant to the *Discourse* and the *Origin*, and which are important to the argument about language and its social significance in the works of Rousseau.

identify a “classical interpretation,” of the Rousseau which imagines both halves of the *Discourse* to be at odds with each other. De Man doubts the validity of this argument, and will argue that a close reading of the Rousseau, most specifically the *Discourse*, enables an interpretation that negates this classical interpretation.

Two terms that play a very important role within *Allegories* are the related concepts of “metaphorical” and “literal” language which de Man identifies within the work of Rousseau. Metaphorical language represents language that is created by non-rational, subjective understandings: language that consist of metaphors, “the transfer to a thing of a name that designates another thing, a transfer from the genus to the species or from the species to the genus or according to the principle of analogy” (*Poetics* 1457 b, within *Allegories*, p.146). Literal language is initially conceived of as language that is formed by rational thought, which is able to objectively portray understandings through denomination and reference. De Man, identifying what appears to be a Derridean binary of preference in the text, indicates that Rousseau seems to imagine—and the classical interpretation understands of the Rousseau—a binary that “separates the literal from the metaphorical language and privileges the former over the latter” (*Allegories*, p.146). However, de Man will go on to demonstrate that the privileging of either side of this binary is impossible. He will demonstrate that the privileging of literal language over metaphorical language is an epistemologically untenable position, and one that the Rousseau itself demonstrates to be so. This literal/metaphorical binary we saw in the section of Rousseau suggested that the instinctual, subjective understanding of things that is initially formed in the encounter is less accurately

representative of something than the later rational, objective understanding. Rousseau suggests that, while we initially form an accurate depiction of the object for our own understanding, the transmission of information of this instinctual, subjective understanding is impractical, and it is necessary and better to produce a literal language that can better facilitate meaningful discourse.

Rousseau, unlike Condillac, at first does catch the fact that the representation of natural encounters through language is lacking, or inaccurate in creating an objectively true recreation of the encounter. Rousseau suggests that the initial natural encounter can be entirely accurate for the instinctual, subjective understanding of the individual, but that it therefore has little meaning for others, unless there is some process that makes this initial language usable in communication. Rousseau suggests that the eventual objective rational creation of language can also produce a communally understandable meaning. De Man analyzes these understandings because he believes that Rousseau places too much stock in the metaphorical language, which will develop into literal language. De Man suggests that the encounters which produce emotionally driven, subjective responses (metaphorical language) are not so accurate as Rousseau might have his reader believe.

In reference to the giant analogy from the *Origin*, de Man explains that “the word ‘giant,’ ... is indeed a metaphor in that it is based on a correspondence between inner feelings of fear and outward properties of size. It may be objectively false ... but it is subjectively candid ... The statement may be in error, but it is not a lie. It expresses the inner experience correctly” (*Allegories* pp.150-

1). De Man does not deny the idea that instinctual representation is an accurate recreation of sentiment that is produced internally by an emotional response to external stimuli. Still, the representation is notable for de Man, as this metaphorical creation stands in for something that never “is,” something that never physically exists. “The metaphor is blind, not because it distorts objective data, but because it presents as certain what is, in fact, a mere possibility” (*Allegories*, p.151). Metaphorical language interprets the sensations and emotions that are involved with an experience, and produces signs that do not necessarily represent the physical realities of the situation, because these cannot be recreated. And it is in this very representation of emotional and sensational experience that the human, in believing in their metaphorical language, first accepts as fact what in reality is only a fiction. De Man identifies that in this moment, both Rousseau and the human creating the metaphor endow the creation of the subjective metaphorical language with a kind of presence that is, ultimately, non-existent. They both take the experience-based language to be a true representation of their own internal feelings. Furthermore, the metaphor replaces the referent with an alternative creation that the human produces as a response to the referent.

De Man explains that the classical interpretation of the Rousseau becomes concerned with the issue of metaphorical language in the Rousseau because it believes that Rousseau improperly utilizes metaphor as the language that explains conceptual topics. The classical interpretation imagines metaphor to be an appropriate language for literature, as it too accepts fiction as fact. The creation of

the metaphor forces a consistency onto “the empirical situation, which is open and hypothetical ... that can only exist in a text” (*Allegories*, p.151). Where the empirical situation is in reality constantly fluctuating, never fixed, and only temporarily perceived in the moment by the individual, the creation of this instinctual, metaphorical language pins the empirical world, and creates an unnatural recreation. “The Metaphor, a substantive figure of speech that changes a referential situation suspended between fiction and fact into a literal fact ... Metaphor overlooks the fictional, textual element in the nature of the entity it connotes” (*Allegories*, p.151). Most problematically for this interpretation, in Rousseau’s giant analogy, the metaphor presents as fact what is only fiction, and if externalized, it requires the self and others to accept this fact. As a result, Rousseau’s suggestion that the subjective, metaphorical understanding of things is accurate, if only for the individual, is misguided, as even for the individual the use of metaphorical language is a disfiguration of reality as a result of its assertion of fact. And it is when metaphorical language is used to discuss conceptual matters, such as philosophy and social structure, that the classical interpretation suggests that Rousseau is making a mistake. This interpretation imagines that the use of metaphorical language in relation to human conceptual represents a failing in Rousseau’s work.

This issue, de Man proposes, is a position that overlooks the truth of how humans actually exist within society and use language within the world. Because metaphorical language is the only kind of language that humans have access to, because there is no truly conceptual, objective language according to Rousseau’s

epistemology, it is improper to assert that there is a proper kind of language to associate with the conceptual and the literary. Rousseau's epistemology does not create the possibility of a conceptual language, and correspondingly, as we will come to see, does not imagine that a conceptually organized social structure can exist.

The first project of the chapter on metaphor—the identification and analysis of preference in a binary—in de Man's *Allegories* is one that is to a great degree an extension of the Derrida's deconstructive thought in the *Grammatology* and his other works. However, in the chapter (and the larger text), de Man tackles one further issue that Derrida does not focus on, namely the role that language plays in the development of social relationships, which is the main focus of the *Discourse*. De Man notices that, in suggesting the point of genesis for human society to be language, Rousseau creates a close relationship between language and society. To illustrate the relationship between language and the social, de Man turns to the giant analogy from the *Origin*. For de Man, this analogy represents the birth of conceptualization. Conceptualization is present in the kind of language that is a product of the rational process of determining that the initial response to the stranger, and subsequent creation of the metaphorical "giant," was inadequate and subjective. The creation of "man" to replace "giant", Rousseau suggests, is a more communicable language of experience, because it is less representative of the internal understanding of emotion and sensation. De Man identifies the creation of this literal/conceptual language to simply be another metaphorical misrepresentation of perception. Rousseau has suggested that the human, after

experiencing the stranger again will realize that her initial fearful creation of “giant” is a misnomer, because the stranger is the same size as she is, and therefore is no longer dangerous (*Origin*, p.13). De Man suggests that the basis for determining the benignity or non-maliciousness of the stranger that Rousseau describes to be a vague and inadequate method at best, “as Goliath and Polyphemos, among other, were soon enough to discover” (*Allegories*, p.154). The quantitative comparison that it represents is one that is entirely based again on a subjective, sensation-based understanding of the same thing. Furthermore, quantitative comparison is *in itself* the result of the same process as the giant metaphor: it externalizes/makes into language a world experience and thereby (because of the way language works) pretends that this experience exists in the world, not just in the perceiver. It is only as a result of the metaphorical structure of all language that we compare quantities and believe that quantities exist in the world.

As a result, even the creation of the secondary literal or conceptual language, which Rousseau explains to be a more useful tool for facilitating the conveyance of meaning in conversation and discourse, is just as much an arbitrary, metaphorical language as the initial creation. Furthermore, the conversation that it is purported to facilitate through its more communally understandable representation is therefore just as much a product of a subjective, metaphorical understanding as language that was a product of non-rational thought would have been.

Here de Man reveals his disagreement with the classical interpretation of the Rousseau that he has presented to his readers. De Man, in demonstrating that the literal/conceptual language described in the Rousseau is just as much a metaphorical creation as the initial metaphorical language out of which it is formed, reveals that the binary which favors one over the other is completely misguided. The preferential treatment that literal/conceptual language gets over metaphorical language, which is “nearly unanimously accepted in Rousseau studies” therefore becomes problematic (*Allegories*, p.146). We must accept that all language is a metaphorical understanding, and that we humans do not have the ability to produce a non-subjective language.

But, in his deconstruction of this binary, de Man does not leave his reader in a position where it is even possible to believe in any meaning as accurate or better. In the scenario where all of our language is just as much a metaphorical understanding of reality, and there is no alternate language that we can attempt to reach, which would allow us objective vision of the world, there is no reason to consider the language that presents fiction as fact as being problematic in any way. A constantly, universally metaphorical language simply is the language that we use, will always use, and must therefore rely upon.

The destruction, or at least the avoidance of a concept of a “true” reality, that is caused by use of metaphor, which de Man has identified, holds further ramifications for Rousseau insofar as his preference for the natural, and fetishization of the natural human is concerned. Rousseau’s lament that the development of rational language is one that separates us from a true experience

of nature is made problematic by the deconstruction of the metaphorical language that de Man has now identified.²³ Rousseau's favoritism of the instinctual language is present in his description of its ability to appeal to the senses and the emotions of human.²⁴ While Rousseau does suggest that initial metaphorical terms are productions that are accurate only for the individual, and that later rationalized language is more useful for conveyance of meaning between humans, he nevertheless favors the natural experiences and natural language. De Man, in identifying that not only the natural, metaphorical language is a disfiguration of fact, but that the literal/conceptual language is too, presents a counter to Rousseau's argument that the metaphorical language serves as a true, or better representation of the emotional reaction of an individual. De Man's argument suggests that in fact rational/literal language is just as much a production of the human mind as the initially formed natural/metaphorical language was. Both of them represent an identical distancing from the encounter with sensation, and the natural reality. Both are unable to reproduce the experience of the encounter without the metaphorization of that encounter. Therefore, it is reasonable to discredit Rousseau's argument that the natural, and the metaphorical language is preferable to the literal/conceptual. It makes no sense to favor one side of the binary, if each side of the binary has an identical shortcoming. As a result,

²³ See the Oak Tree analogy on page 38.

²⁴ De Man suggests that, while parts of the *Second Discourse* are "relatively free of value judgments, they nevertheless invite value judgments on the part of the interpreter which favor animal over man, nature over culture, acts over words, and particularity over generality" (*Allegories*, p.145 [modified]). The text presents the natural, and all things that Rousseau associates with it as desirable, and more positive than the human alternative.

Rousseau's fetishization of the natural experience, and his creation of a narrative suggestive of a decline in human experience, the result of our reliance on the rational faculties, becomes illogical, because in using our rational language, we are just as much using a metaphorical language as we were in our initial linguistic production. Oddly, the deconstruction of the difference between metaphorical and literal language does make Rousseau's argument problematic, but simultaneously the resulting new conclusion would allow Rousseau to rejoice in the fact that we are, even as rational humans still engaged in constant use of metaphorical language.

De Man will go on to show that it is the universal metaphorical representation of sensation that is the basis of social interaction, as "the concept interprets the metaphor of numerical sameness as if it were a statement of literal fact. Without this literalization, there could be no society" (*Allegories*, p.155). Here de Man suggests that, according to the classical interpretation of the *Discourse*, the creation of the conceptual language is actually a misrepresentation, as conceptual language, like metaphorical language, presents as fact what is in reality only fiction. This misrepresentation is subsequently accepted by others as fact so that communication can be communally understood as having meaning. In turn, relationships that are formed by the use of this conceptual language therefore are similarly subject to the issue same criticisms of metaphorical language. Additionally, "society [just like language] originates with the quantitative comparison of conceptual relationships" (*Allegories*, p.155). Societies are structured identically to language—"at the beginning of the second part of the

Discourse, the origin of society is described in exactly parallel terms” to language (*Allegories*, p.155). The two accept as fact, what is only the product of the metaphoricity of language, and assert these facts, so that relationships can form. As a result, for the classical interpretation, society is just as suspect as metaphor, and the development of the second half of the *Discourse*, which depends on the epistemological argument of the first half is thrown into disarray because it presents as fact in the second half what is only based on metaphorical understanding. The classical interpretation imagines that “conceptual language, the foundation of civil society, is, it appears, a lie superimposed upon an error” (*Allegories*, p.155). As a result, this interpretation sees a misrepresentation that is inescapably inherent in the various building blocks of society, and believes that the structure of the Rousseau is at odds with itself, because the social order, which purports to be based on a conceptual structure, has the same quality of metaphoricity as metaphorical language did.

Here again, de Man suggests that the classical interpretation of Rousseau makes certain mistakes in its understanding of his works. If we acknowledge the fact that the metaphoricity of language is a reality in both linguistic and social structures, we see that there is no truer society than the one that is formed by this “lie, superimposed on an error” (ibid). “What Rousseau calls ‘truth’ designates neither the adequation of language to reality, nor the essence of things shining through the opacity of words, but rather the suspicion that human specificity may be rooted in linguistic deceit” (*Allegories*, p.156). Human society is, like language, completely built on metaphor. So, while it is true that society is a metaphorical

creation that presents as fact something that may never naturally exist, there is no alternate structure to society that de Man conceives of. Our human society is made possible by this metaphoricity, and as a result, de Man's text demonstrates that understanding the society as an unnatural creation, based on subjective human understanding, is problematic, because the unnatural/natural dichotomy itself is only the result of language, and because this binary cannot logically be applied to language.

Here de Man, in his deconstruction of language and social structure, simultaneously engages in what nearly seems to be a process of re-construction through his rhetoric. De Man differs from Derrida in that his deconstruction of language does not result in an aporia-like terminus of the argument wherein we cannot place any stock in the deconstructed terms. De Man imagines that the social order that we have, while it may be a construction based on metaphorical relations reliant on the acceptance of our subjective, sensorial experiences as objective fact, is made possible by, and is dependent on, this same metaphoricity. As a result, de Man believes that Rousseau's *Second Discourse* is not a text formed out of two incompatible, unevenly structured halves. The social and political structures that are created in the second half of the *Discourse* are, as a result of de Man's analysis is able to be explained through the epistemological structure of the first half of the *Discourse*. The classical interpretation has failed to see the possibility of a relationship between the first and second halves of the discourse because it wished to imagine the possibility of a language of presence, of an objective basis for social structures. While this is not something that Rousseau

could feasibly provide them with, de Man reveals that a desire for a language or a social structure built around objective and rationally organized principles is a pointless one, as both of these human structures are, and always will be constructions of metaphor.

Unusually, de Man, in trying to suggest that the binary of metaphorical and literal/conceptual language is one that is irrelevant, and that there is no truer, or preferable kind of language (or society), relies on a terminology that seems to pass value judgments on language. De Man wishes to propose that “the ‘pure’ fiction of the state of nature precedes, in principle, all valorization” and that subsequent valorization of language that purports to access a literal understanding of reality is as impossible as the existence of such a language itself (*Allegories*, p.158). Nevertheless, de Man continues to preserve the terminology of the *Discourse* and the *Origin*, which “invite value judgments on the part of the interpreter” (*Allegories*, p.145). He refers to the situation out of which metaphorical language arises as “a lie,” “an error,” and “a language of fiction,” all of which, simply by means of their usage suggest the possibility of their opposites (*Allegories*, pp.155, 157). De Man never refers to “a truth,” “a non-error,” and “a language of fact” that would exist within our language, because the deconstruction of the relationship between metaphorical and literal/conceptual defies the possibility of valorization. But still, de Man’s chapter on metaphor seems to entertain the possibility of a valorization in its terminology, if not overtly in its argument. Whether this element of the de Man’s rhetoric is evidence of an underlying prejudice in his work—an imagined “true” language—, or simply a way of

preserving the terminology of the Rousseau, the text still leaves the idea of a non-fiction in the mind of the reader. It is this very valorization, or invitation to valorize, in the Rousseau and the de Man that I will address in my chapter on Herder, which I imagine Herder's epistemology to simultaneously address and make a non-issue.

The Internal World: Johann Gottfried Herder and His Theory of Non-Arbitrary Language

While an intense interest in the origins of language circulated through France, simultaneously, an alternate examination of human epistemology and linguistic theory was beginning to form at the future German intellectual epicenter of the University of Königsberg. At the center of this “Königsberg Enlightenment” were the philosophers Immanuel Kant, Johann Georg Hamann, and Johann Gottfried Herder, among numerous other significant thinkers of the German Enlightenment.²⁵ Herder, born in 1744, studied at the University of Königsberg under both Kant, who was a lecturer at the time, and outside of the university with Hamann, who taught Herder as a private tutor. Herder would become one of Hamann’s closest disciples. Hamann, as a philosopher who frequently wrote on language and its origin undoubtedly helped foster Herder’s interest in linguistic theory. Herder would go on to become close friends with Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and Herder’s philosophical works played an important part in both Goethe’s own works and the development of German Romanticism and the Sturm und Drang movement (Gode, pp.v,167-8). Herder, while a name often overlooked in examination of German romanticism, played a significant role

²⁵ Herder would leave Königsberg prior to Kant’s publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781.

as a peer and friend in Goethe's development. For all their early similarity in thought, Herder has been thoroughly eclipsed by the fame and success of the younger Goethe. We know of the age of romanticism and of "German letters, specifically—as the age of Goethe" (Gode, p.169). In his own works, Herder tackles a wide variety of topics, from the development of a concept of the German "Volk" to philosophical writings on aesthetics. Here, in my work, I will focus on Herder's 1772 *Essay on the Origin of Language*.²⁶ In the *Abhandlung*, an essay for which he won the 1771 Berlin Academy of Sciences essay competition, Herder continues Hamann's examination of linguistic theory and develops his own unique theory of human epistemology. The *Abhandlung* both critiques Condillac's *Essay* and Rousseau's *Discourse*, and uses inconsistencies that it identifies in the two works to assist in the creation of Herder's own epistemological arguments.²⁷ In the *Abhandlung*, Herder imagines a structure of language and human thought that, while it does draw on both Condillac's and Rousseau's texts, addresses the relationship of language to social and human development differently. While Herder certainly does not create a theory of linguistic development that is free from critique, the *Abhandlung* presents an argument that, as a result of Herder's relative obscurity, has not made it into many of the significant texts of literary

²⁶ *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*

²⁷ It should be noted that, at the time that he wrote the *Abhandlung*, Herder presumably did not have knowledge of, or access to, Rousseau's *Origin*. The *Origin* was first published ten years after Herder wrote and submitted the *Abhandlung*, and as Rousseau and Herder did not have any contact. While Herder was certainly aware of Rousseau and his works, Herder did not achieve prominence until quite late in Rousseau's life, and there is no record of any correspondence between the two philosophers.

criticism, such as *On Grammatology* and *Allegories of Reading*. Nevertheless, the arguments that Herder makes in his brief work address problems within the works of the two French philosophers. The arguments that Herder makes enable a different kind of interaction with the work of Derrida and de Man that allow us to think of epistemology and language beyond, or with a twist on the French enlightenment and its deconstruction in the 20th century.

The issue of social language and the variety of signs that is expressed externally, which plays such a significant role for Rousseau and de Man, is only a minor topic in Herder's text. The minimal attention to external language is not so much a choice of Herder's to focus on the more significant of two aspects of human language, as a choice to pick the language that most clearly represents the quality of human language that makes it, and humans, unique. Herder will come to explain that the most important aspect of human language is its power to define things by a process of differentiation that animals are incapable of reproducing. As a result, the kind of human language that first enables this process of differentiation, internal language, is the primary focus of Herder's text. Still, the difference between Herder, and the French philosophers' understanding of externalized, social language merits examination, as Herder's understanding of external language points to a radically different way of conceiving how language first affects humankind.

Herder's description of the relationship of language to social interaction is one aspect of the *Abhandlung* that differs greatly from Rousseau's. In the *Discourse*, Rousseau argues that the origins of language and more complex

(rational) thought occur simultaneously, and that social interaction, made possible by means of the use language, facilitates the development of the of human thought (Rousseau, *Discourse*, 142, 146).²⁸ Herder partially agrees with Rousseau's argument from the *Discourse* on this issue. Herder similarly believes that reflective thought and language are developed simultaneously in humans. Herder explains that the development of reflection is also the development of an internal dialogue, as we "cannot align the first reflective argument without dialoguing in [our souls] or without striving to dialogue" (Herder, *Abhandlung*, p.128). Furthermore, it is this very internal dialogue that allows for the development of an external dialogue. If our internal reflective process is a kind of dialogue within our own minds, then "the first human thought is in its very essence a preparation for the possibility of dialoguing with others" (*Abhandlung*, p.128). Here we see that Herder conceives of a pair of languages. The first is an internal language, which is one that exists purely within the mind, and the second an external language, which we manipulate for external discourse. Each of these languages, Herder characterizes to have a specific kind of sign. The internal language is made up of "characteristic words" which we apply to internally defined things, while the external language is made up of "words of communication" which we use to engage with others (*Abhandlung*, p.128). Unlike the internal sign of Condillac, that was observed by the rational mind, developed into complex thoughts, and translated into language for external communication, Herder's "characteristic words" are capable of dialogue themselves just as

²⁸ See corresponding section from the Rousseau chapter (pp. 38-9)

“communicative words” are. Herder does not see a great separation between the internal and the external sign because there is no difference in how they represent for the human. Both the internal and the external sign apply and denote the differentiating mark through differentiation and determination, and Herder considers the two to both be a type of language. However, in Herder, uniquely, the internal rational process is one that is truly a language of its own. Therefore, language, which for Rousseau is conceived of as a purely external creation that exists to facilitate discourse and rational development, is both external and internal for Herder. Because of this different understanding of language, Herder suggests that it is almost a happy coincidence that social interaction is made feasible by the development of the reflective capabilities. Where Rousseau saw social interaction as one of the important cornerstones of rational development, Herder suggests that reflective development can occur entirely devoid of social interaction. Discourse, or dialogue, which Rousseau believes to be an important element in human mental development, become both an internal and external process which the human mind can engage in individually and internally in the *Abhandlung*. For Herder, the development of the external language, while it certainly is a significant part of human interaction, and one that is positive for human existence, is in the *Abhandlung* almost only an after-thought, one that gets only minor attention within the epistemology of the text.

Herder will go on to suggest that both the internal/characteristic language and the external/communicative language are similar in their signification. Herder states that the production of the sign for both internal and external

language cannot be arbitrary. He does not imagine that the human could form a language that does not have any rationale for the association of concept to characteristic sign, and also of communicative sign to characteristic sign. “To invent a language out of one’s brain, arbitrarily and without any basis of choice, [ohne allen Grund der Wahl] is—at least for a human soul that wants to have reason, some reason for everything—no less of a torture than it is for the body to be caressed to death” (*Abhandlung*, p.139). Herder argues that the human would not allow for the creation of a completely arbitrary language, as it goes contrary to her nature to do anything, to create without a logical basis for the action. “An arbitrarily thought-out language is in all senses contrary to the entire analogy of man’s spiritual forces” (*Abhandlung*, p.139).

The non-arbitrary relationship that Herder supposes to be present in the origin of the spoken language is one example of a place where Herder makes an untenable argument, especially in the face of modern criticism. Herder suggests that spoken language initially was an attempt to recreate the audible sound that the human had identified as a thing’s quality of difference that enabled its definition. “The first vocabulary was thus collected from the sounds of the world. From every sounding being echoed its name: The human soul impressed upon it its image thought of it as a distinguishing mark...the sound had to designate the thing as the things that gave forth the sound” (*Abhandlung*, p.132).²⁹ Herder imagines that the human applies a name to the internally defined concept that is

²⁹ This argument bears striking resemblance to the historical depiction of the development of signs in the Condillac, see page 17 above.

representative of what enabled definition in the first place—in this case sound—and proposes that this represents a non-arbitrary spoken language. Herder's example for how this process occurs is uncomfortably structured, for how erudite some of his other thoughts are. Herder imagines that a man hears a sheep bleating, and his "soul recognizes it" by determining it as "that which bleats," which was the internal distinguishing mark (*Abhandlung*, p.117). As a result of this identification, the spoken word to designate the sheep is an almost mimetic production of the bleat, which Herder maintains is not arbitrary.

The non-arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified in spoken language that Herder suggests exists seems to be one that is tenuous. Numerous arguments have been made that assert that the signification process of spoken language is indeed arbitrary.³⁰ If we are to examine Herder's argument, two issues with his argument seem to function as a viable refutation.

The first question that arises is: how do we explain the fact that different languages have different terms for the same thing? If there is a clear representative sonic term that represents the thing, then why do languages not use the same term for all things that produce any variety of sound? Multiple languages will refer to the sound that an animal makes differently, and will use different sounds to recreate that sound—for example, in English we characterize

³⁰ The section arbitrary nature of the sign in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, is one of the more widely known and disseminated sections. It opens with the statement that "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary," and because sign means "the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, [we] can simply say: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*" (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p.67).

the sound that a dog makes as “bark” or “woof,” in German the sound is transcribed as “wau,” and “waouh” or “ouah” in French, “guau” in Spanish, and “hav” in Hebrew. The assertion that the human is able to produce a sound that is a non-arbitrary recreation of the heard sound is made problematic by the fact that different people will describe the same sound differently. The external language is a language of communication, which means that it is dependent on making terminology that is understood by multiple people, and one that tries to create words that will be interpretable by the other individuals. As a result, words do not represent what individuals hear, only what a group of people have come to accept as representative for the concept.

The second problem is that Herder presents a confusing argument which seems to be an apparent contradiction in his own argumentation. Herder imagines that many will ask of his suggestion—that all language is based off heard sounds—how it is, then, that a word could be created for something that makes no sound. Or how could a word be created for a concept or non-tangible idea? For example, it seems unlikely that one could justifiably assert that there is a defining sonic quality of the concept of “redness” or of “roughness.” Colors do not have sounds that are attributed to them, which would allow us to explain color to those who are blind and have never experienced colors. Here, Herder argues that the human mind creates almost synesthetic associations between non-sounding qualities and audible qualities. Herder imagines that “the soul, caught in the throng of such converging sensations and needing to create a word, reached out and grasped possibly the word of an adjacent sense whose feeling flowed together with the

first" (*Abhandlung*, p.141). By Herder's logic, in the absence of sounds to associate with a certain thing, the human will spontaneously associate a sound with that thing. Because our senses all work in conjunction, in certain scenarios where our senses cannot produce a sonic impression of a thing, they will interpret other senses as indicative of sound, or associate another sense with a sound, and thereby develop a sound for something that originally made no sound. This argument, while it solves the problem of having no clear way to argue that all spoken words are to some degree a recreation of heard sounds, contradicts Herder's earlier assertion that the human can and will not willingly accept the creation of a language without a reflective reason. Randomly chosen sounds that "feel like" other sensations seem to be representative of arbitrary grounds for the formation of external language. Both of these issues make it difficult to believe in Herder's argumentation that external language is always non-arbitrary, and formed through logically oriented decisions. Here Herder falls prey to the same problem of asserting presence in the basic, natural decisions that our minds engage in that Condillac does.

While Herder's assertion that there is a logically oriented, and yet simultaneously mimetic relationship between the spoken word and its referent is easily refutable, we must remember that external language is a minor focus of Herder's work. However, if we try to apply the same arguments to the matter of internal language we run into certain issues. It is impossible to suggest that internal language has a sound, as it is never vocalized, except in translation as external language. Furthermore, external language serves a completely different

purpose within the epistemology of the *Abhandlung* from internal language. External language serves as a language of communication which is dependent on group understanding, and therefore must sacrifice personal connection to signs in order to allow communal understanding.

One way to understand the difference between the internal and external languages that Herder describes, can be found in their relationship to the individual. We use external language as a process of externalizing that which we have internally, and we do so based on the assumption that our external language is going to be understood, and then interpreted as a reference to the other individual's internal language. Herder articulates this theory in an example that he uses to describe the process of childhood language acquisition.

“Parents never teach their children language without the latter, by themselves, inventing language along with them: Parents merely draw their children's attention to differences between things by means of certain verbal signs, and consequently they do not replace, but only facilitate and promote for them, the use of reason through language” (*Abhandlung*, p.121).

In this example, Herder does not imagine that the signs that parents use, to help their children create their own internal signs, are adopted as the children's internal signs. These external signs that the parents use help their children learn how to produce their own internal signs by identifying differentiating marks within things. The parent does not assume that their use of an external sign will serve as an adequate, standalone way for their child to make sense of the world, but rather the parent assumes that the child, too, has the capability to produce internal signs, their own words of characterization. We assume that our internal

language is not understood in the external language, we assume that the external language that we create does not express meaning alone for the other person, but we do assume that the other person has an internal language of their own that they will have activated by the use of our external language. Therefore, we can say that: through the use of the external language with another person, we anticipate the reactivation of the internal language in the other person. While external and internal language are different, importantly, they do both function as tools for demarcating difference between things. The external language helps the child create their own internal language by showing them how to find differences, and the internal language is what reveals and remembers the differences to the child.

What is unique about internal language, is that for Herder it is a type of language that does not at all function for the purpose of communication, and is a language that internally facilitates characterization of things. So, although Herder certainly makes a mistake that will be refuted by later theorists in arguing that external language could be formed non-arbitrarily and mimetically, this does not mean that we are unable address the issue of the internal word, or attempt to address the possibility that it is formed non-arbitrarily

In order to determine whether internal language is arbitrary or not, we must initially begin by examining how it is that Herder conceives of the epistemological developments that lead up to the initial creation of internal language. The difference between Herder and the French philosophers' epistemologies begins with a variation in their terminology. One significant word from Herder's terminology must be explained, so as not to blur the differences

between his understanding of epistemology and those of Condillac and Rousseau. Both Condillac and Rousseau conceive of the quality of mind that the human being accesses in order to develop complex thought as the quality of reason [*raison*] or rationality [*rationalité*]. These terms imply that the quality that differentiates us from animals is one that is logically oriented. Rationality and reason suggest that decisions made or ideas had through the rational or reasonable mind have a *ratio*, a logic, a reason behind them. One implication of the use of rational thought or reason is that the thought produced is not created by arbitrary or unfounded decisions, rather it is logically oriented and explainable. Johann Georg Hamann, like the French philosophers, will also place the quality of human uniqueness within our capacity to use our minds rationally and reflectively. Hamann writes in his own works that "reason is language" [*Vernunft ist Sprache*].³¹ Hamann, like his contemporaries Condillac and Rousseau believes that the human mind is unique as a result of its ability to use reason [*Vernunft*]. Herder, while he will go on to form a similar association to Rousseau and Hamann—that the ability of humans to think is intrinsically attached to language—uses a different word to represent this different human capacity for complex thought: *Besonnenheit*. Herder stresses that the unique quality of the human mind is this *Besonnenheit*, which does not translate perfectly into any one word in English, but which might be most accurately translated as reflection. *Besonnenheit* can be translated as the quality of being deliberate and reflective, whereas the use of reason or rationality does

³¹ Johann Georg Hamann, *Brief an Herder*, v. 8. August 1784, in: Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 7 vols., Arthur Henkel (ed.), Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1955–75, vol. 5, p. 177.

not necessarily imply any quality of reflection or recollection. *Besonnenheit* is the substantive form of the adjective *besonnen* (which can be translated as reflection, or also as calmness or level-headedness). *Besonnen* is also the past tense of the verb *besinnen*, which translates well as: to bethink or to reflect.³² Additionally, it must be noted that, unlike bethink, *besinnen* contains the German word “Sinn” which literally translates as sense, as in sensation. The Zedler encyclopedia, first published between 1731 and 1754, defines *Besinnen* as the regeneration/production of the sense or the perception of a thing [*Den Sinn oder die Empfindung einer Sache wieder hervorbringen*] (*Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, Volume 3, p.1496). Unlike any of the English translations of the concept of rationality, *besinnen/Besonnenheit* keeps reflection closely bound to sensuality. Here we see the initial difference between Herder and the two French philosophers. Unlike rationality or reason, which suggest that the generation of new thoughts occurs as a result of the use of logic, *Besonnenheit* suggests that the development of more complex thought is one that is not generative through internal creation, but rather dependent on sensation that the body and mind are and have been experiencing. *Besonnenheit* allows for the development of reflective, complex thought because, unlike its counterpart, instinct, it allows humans to know and identify their sensations, and thereby manipulate their sensation to determine how they should act. Here Herder’s terminology for the power of human reason/reflection/rationality

³² The definition of to bethink given in the Oxford English Dictionary is: “To think of or about, bear in mind; to call to mind, recollect. To think of, imagine, conceive” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, volume 1, p.829).

shows its uniqueness. Herder, unlike Rousseau and Condillac, does not ask “what human power [reason, rationality] gives me knowledge through sensation?” but rather, “what human power [*Besonnenheit*] gives me knowledge of my sensation?” *Besonnenheit* makes thought and language not a process of internal label creation, but rather a process of internal differentiation, and determination. The human manifests “*Besonnenheit* if he is able not only to recognize characteristics vividly or clearly but if he can also recognize and acknowledge to himself one or several of them as distinguishing characteristics” (*Abhandlung*, p.116). *Besonnenheit* allows us to experience all of our sensations in the mind, and separate them, by giving us a way to know each separately. Unlike reason for Condillac, where the process of complicated thought development implied a creation of a new, not-previously existent thing as a result of combination of experience, for Herder, the process of thought creation is a determination of qualities that differentiate a thing (a conglomerate of sensations) from other things—determination of sensation. The quality of *Besonnenheit* does not attempt to misconstrue the origin of more complex thought, and imply the possibility that the individual is generative of new concepts; *Besonnenheit* lets the human mind know of the experiences that it had. *Besonnenheit* does not purport to create knowledge, it suggests only that we identify things, and label that the senses which are only known to be within the mind because *Besonnenheit* allows us to know them by giving us a tool to differentiate things. Only as a result of our ability to know of and interact with of our own personal experience can and do we develop complex thought. Furthermore, complex thought is entirely a manipulation of our

experience, of our sensation, and a reflection upon it. In no way can the usage of *Besonnenheit* create something not based in human experience (outside of sensation), it can only re-analyze and identify relationships within experiences and the pre-existing memory of the mind.

The creation of internal language for Herder is entirely dependent on the human quality of *Besonnenheit*, which allows humans to interact with sensation differently from other animals.³³ Herder suggests that all animals have a sphere of knowledge, the size of which is dependent on the different tasks that the animal will have to engage in in order to survive.

“The keener the senses of the animals and the more wonderful their artifacts, the narrower is their sphere ... contrariwise, the more varied the activities and the tasks of an animal, the more diffuse its attention and the more numerous the objects of it, the more unsteady its way of life, in short, the wider and the more varied its sphere, the more we note that the power of its senses is dispersed and weakened” (*Abhandlung*, p.104).

The greater the list of acts that the animal must engage in in order to survive, the larger the sphere of knowledge of the animal, and correspondingly, the lesser sensorial attention the animal can devote to each of the different tasks. Herder imagines that each animal has a differently sized sphere within which it operates, and proportionately to which the quantity of each of its senses changes. For animals with a small sphere, the sensations that the animal perceives are so

³³ Herder begins the *Abhandlung* with the statement “While still an animal, man already has language” (*Abhandlung*, p.87). Herder will go on to maintain that, while we do have a different method of interacting with sensation from all other animals, we are not fundamentally different from them.

powerful and so influential that the animal cannot help but respond immediately to the strength of the sensation. "The narrower the sphere of an animal ... the keener its senses, the more clearly focused on one object its conceptions, the more compelling its drives ... it is a living mechanism, a ruling instinct that speaks and perceives" (*Abhandlung*, p.105). According to Herder, the animal that has a, relative to humans, limited sphere, and a limited list of actions that it must engage in to survive, is compelled by the strength of its sensation to action. These are the animals that are completely controlled by instinctive drives, "sensuousness has [always] overwhelmed them" (*Abhandlung*, p.116). Humans, however, are not like these instinctive animals. Herder argues that humans have extensively large spheres, and correspondingly differentiated and weak senses. "It seems assured that man is by far inferior to the animals in the intensity and reliability of his instincts and indeed he does not have at all what in many animal species we regard as innate artifactive skills and drives" (*Abhandlung*, p.103) As a result of the greatness of the human sphere, the human does not have sensations that act on the human strongly enough to result in immediate instinctive responses. Herder suggests that the sphere that the human exists within is so great that the sensations that affect the human do not alone create enough of a drive to compel the human to action.

Here Herder's epistemology begins to diverge from the epistemology of Condillac and Rousseau insofar as trust in human sensation and natural ability is concerned. Condillac and Rousseau both conceive of a human who, prior to the use of higher level thought, would be able to thrive in the natural world through

sensation alone. Herder believes that this is impossible, because he argues that human sensation is, unlike the intense sensation of instinctive animals, weak, and does not allow the human any capacity to respond to the world around her. Unlike Condillac, who imagined that human perception was constant, and that the human had full awareness of all of her sensations at all times (and that it is just forgetfulness that explains the sensations that we are not aware of), Herder does not believe that human perception is this powerful, or even something that we are constantly aware of.³⁴ In the section of the *Abhandlung* that explains human sensation, Herder's argument grapples with an issue that will become one of the chief foci of post-structuralist literary criticism—the issue of imperfect sensation, and the assertion of a presence where there is only absence in the 18th century French philosophers' understanding of sensation. Derrida and de Man identify that that the assumption (in Condillac, and certain readings of Rousseau) that sensation is neither ever fully encompassing of the natural encounter, nor subsequently accurately recreated in language, are problematic because they suppose the existence of a “true” or “complete” understanding of nature which they believe it impossible to access. Herder's argument resolves this problem by addressing it in a different way. The epistemology of the *Abhandlung* begins with the acknowledgement that human sensation is imperfect and inadequate. Unlike intense instinctive sensation, human sensation does not produce a visceral or clear depiction of the world that could lead to an immediate instinctive reaction; rather, it produces a cloudy, incomplete understanding of the world, which the

³⁴ See corresponding section from the Condillac chapter (pp. 11-12)

human will need to engage with differently to make sense of the world. Herder does not formulate an argument that negates the criticism of Derrida or de Man by creating an epistemology that can justify the accuracy of human perception. I do not mean to suggest that Herder's argument about the weakness of human sensation makes the arguments of Derrida and de Man inadequate or irrelevant. They still are significant claims insofar as they reveal problems and arguments that were otherwise not initially apparent in Condillac and Rousseau. What Herder demonstrates is an epistemological theory that does not suggest that human perception and sensation are able to recreate the world in its entirety; rather, he accepts the reality that human perception is incomplete. Herder does not assert presence in human perception, and acknowledges this absence. While he does not conceive of it in the same terms, Herder creates an argument that, like Derrida's argument in the *Archeology*, identifies an inescapable absence in human perception. Regardless of its weakness, human perception is ultimately the only reason we can have any understanding of natural encounters or sensorial inputs, and therefore must be accepted as the basis for our understanding of the world. Because of human sensorial weakness and this resulting incompleteness in perception, the question never arises in Herder's text whether language can adequately signify the world; *Besonnenheit*, which is language, and which is differentiation and determination, makes the world accessible to the human in the first place. *Besonnenheit* creates the world for the human because without it, the human would not know that they existed within a qualifiable world.

In proposing that human sensation is weak, Herder concludes that, as a result, we are in many ways weaker, or less effectively prepared to handle the world than other animals are. Here Herder openly contradicts Rousseau's belief that humans, even without the use of reason, are "the most advantageously organized of all" animals (Rousseau, *Discourse*, 131).³⁵ Herder writes that in truth, "in man, everything is in the greatest disproportion—his senses and his needs, his powers and the sphere of endeavor awaiting him, his organs and his language" (Herder, *Abhandlung*, p.108). Herder imagines the human without complex thought to be the "most orphaned child of nature. Naked and bare, weak and in need, shy and unarmed: and ... deprived of all guides of life" (*Abhandlung*, p.107). Because our sensations and our instinctive drives are weak, we are not compelled to react immediately to our sensations, like other animals are. Nevertheless, Herder acknowledges that humans have been successful and have managed to bend many other animals to their will. As a result, Herder argues that there must be some alternate human ability that fills the void where instinct is not.

The ability alternate to instinct that we as humans possess, and which we manipulate to allow ourselves some way to compete with other animals, is the unique term that Herder creates as something which is representative, but not the same as, the power of reason/rationality that Condillac and Rousseau see in humans: the power of *Besonnenheit*. Because our sensations are so weak, humans are not compelled to respond to drives in the same way animals are. Where the animal immediately acted on the drives created by its intense sensation, the

³⁵ See corresponding section from the Rousseau chapter (p. 39)

human experiences sensations, but more weakly than animals do, and therefore, is not compelled to action by instinctive drives. "If man had the drives of animals, he could not have what we now call reason in him [*Besonnenheit*]; for such drives would pull his forces darkly toward a single point, in such a way that he would have no free sphere of awareness" (*Abhandlung*, p.111). Where the senses never reached the mind of the instinctive animal, the human mind is able to "bring the senses by" it, and analyze them individually (*Abhandlung*, p.109). Through this alternate process of engaging with sensations with *Besonnenheit*, the human is able to reflect on her senses, and thus doing become aware of her senses individually, and thereby determine how to act upon those sensations. *Besonnenheit* is the process of bringing our sensations before the mind, and it allows humans to observe the "vast ocean of sensation" and "single out one wave, arrest it, concentrate [*Besonnenheit's*] attention on it, and be conscious of being attentive" (*Abhandlung*, p.115). *Besonnenheit* allows the human to know anything of her sensations in the first place, and determine what aspect of the senses that are bombarding her is significant. Without the ability of *Besonnenheit* the various senses that reach the human are never truly understood or known at all, they simply (in the case of animals, as humans inescapably have *Besonnenheit*) are acted upon by instinct.

Here, Herder produces an argument that can be used to combat Rousseau's longing for the "natural human" and the "true experience" that he associates with this human being. Rousseau imagines that the human was an animal that was gifted with abilities that allowed her, even without reason to compete successfully

with other animals. Justified by his claim that the natural human was a capable animal, Rousseau produced a preference for this natural existence, as he imagines that the rational, unnatural human, only attains success in the world through unnatural or non-true reason, which corrupts experience by perceiving it through a conceptual, non-visceral lens. Herder's argument does not conceive of a true experience and a false experience. Human sensation is different from that of all other animals. It is weaker, and therefore *Besonnenheit* allows humans to engage with their sensation differently, to engage with their sensation at all: *Besonnenheit* completely changes the initial process of sensation. "*Besonnenheit* is the power of thought which is called reason in man and in the animal instinct. The difference between *Besonnenheit* and instinct is not one of degree not one of a supplementary endowment with powers; it lies in a totally distinct orientation of our powers [sensation]" (*Abhandlung*, p.110). *Besonnenheit* is not something that differentiates humans from animals insofar as the ability to sense things is concerned, as both animals and humans sense things. The difference is that we, as humans, are able to think of our senses, and define them. Animals do not know that they are sensing anything, as they are compelled to action by their instinctive drives before they can identify that they are sensing at all. Herder, referencing Rousseau's belief in the "natural" human, holds this idea in contempt, and writes that "in the most sensuous state, man is still human ... and the least sensuous state of the animals was still animal" (*Abhandlung*, pp.87, 114-5).

Additionally, if humans sense the same way as animals, Rousseau's assertion—that there is a true or natural way to engage with the world, which the

human does not have once she becomes rational—becomes problematic, because it suggests that humans perceive the world falsely. Herder eliminates the problem of a true or false perception of the world. This fetishization of the natural, which Rousseau adheres to, in maintaining that human perception is perfect, and better pre-rationalization, becomes illogical if we accept Herder's argument that the human, despite having *Besonnenheit* still senses "naturally." For Herder human is always natural, there is no binary that has implicit within its structure a favoritism of one term as the better or proper term. Here Herder's argument again feels reminiscent of de Man's identification, and rejection, in the *Allegories* of the possibility of a preferential treatment of the "natural" in Rousseau's works. For Herder, like for de Man, there is not the possibility of a "natural" that could exist in opposition to an "unnatural." (De Man identifies in the Rousseau the possibility of the presence of a binary of "true" and "untrue," and notices that Rousseau creates a structure which could treat the "true" as a proper or better experience of nature, and the "untrue" as an improper or worse experience of nature. De Man subsequently argues that the reading of this binary into the Rousseau is and does not fully account for the reality that the "untrue" understanding is simply a development of the "true" understanding, and therefore they must be equally valued/impossible to value.) While Herder does not identify the issue in the same way, his epistemology suggests that it is impossible to have an "unnatural" way of sensing the world, and therefore eliminates the possibility of a true/better or untrue/worse kind of experience of sensation. Herder believes that sensation only varies between animals in strength, and that the difference in mental ability lies

not within a different kind of sensation, but a different use of that sensation. Humans will never be able to be so overwhelmed by their sensation as to act on instinct, and animals, without a weakening of their senses, and corresponding reorganization of their mental faculties to allow for the use of *Besonnenheit*, will never know of or understand their sensations.

By Herder's logic, that which makes humans weaker than other animals—their weak sensation and resulting lack of instinct—simultaneously makes humans stronger, because it allows them *Besonnenheit*, and the ability to determine what the best response to their senses is. It is in this very ability to examine and characterize our sensations that Herder believes the birth of internal language to occur. "Man, placed in the state of reflection [*Besonnenheit*] which is peculiar to him, with this reflection for the first time given full freedom of his action, did invent language" (*Abhandlung*, p.115). Herder goes on to explain that language arises because *Besonnenheit* allows humans to focus on their sensations and to know them, instead of just experiencing and responding to them blindly. Because of this, we can identify certain sensations that are combined together within an object, and as a result of this identification, we come to be able to think of the object as just this—a combination of a variety of sensations that we have perceived. The object takes on a meaning that is created by our ability to perceive it, and to determine that it possesses certain qualities.

However, Herder does not imagine that we determine what things are simply through knowing a bundle of sensations, as Condillac did. Herder imagines that the object only truly becomes distinct within the mind as an object, as

opposed to part of a greater whole, once it can be determined to not be a part of, to be different from that greater whole. This differentiating ability is also a product of *Besonnenheit*. Because *Besonnenheit* allows for the knowledge of sensations, it also allows humans to “select in [one image] distinguishing marks” and “know that this object is this and not another” (*Abhandlung*, p.116). As *Besonnenheit* analyzes the various sensations that pour into the human, it focuses its attention on organizing the various sensations into groups to help identify and explain objects. The identification of all objects is enabled by a process of internal differentiation, which in turn is dependent on *Besonnenheit* finding some distinguishing mark or sensation in an object that allows the mind to separate it from other objects and other sensations. Humans “manifest reflection [*Besonnenheit*] if they are able not only to recognize all characteristics vividly or clearly but if they can also recognize and acknowledge to themselves one or several of them as distinguishing characteristics” (*Abhandlung*, p.116). Herder argues that once the mind is able not only to perceive the sensations that an object produces, but also the quality (or qualities) that makes(s) an object different from other objects, it is able to truly conceive of the object. This distinguishing mark “was a conceived sign through which the soul clearly remembered an idea—and what is that other than a word?” (*Abhandlung*, p.117). Herder believes that it is this distinguishing mark, this quality of difference, that is the point of genesis for the word of characterization and all of internal language. The distinguishing mark and the word of characterization are synonymous. “Language has been invented! Invented as naturally and to man as necessarily as man was man” (*Abhandlung*,

p.118).³⁶ The initial process of language creation here is one that is distinctly internal and personal, because it is a creation that understands objects as not only a collection of the sensations that we have perceived, but more importantly as an object that has some quality that makes it stick out from other objects for us.

Now that we have outlined the epistemological origins of the internal sign, we can return to the question of its arbitrariness. According to the epistemology that Herder has presented to us, the origin of internal language appears to be something completely logically oriented. The word of characterization is simply an internal creation and identification of the quality that is different about the object within the mind, created and recreated as the sensations and thoughts of the idea are constituted in the mind by the act of *Besonnenheit*. If we accept, as Herder does, that *Besonnenheit*, the unique combination of sensation and reason, is the only way that we can garner any understanding of the external world, and that therefore, we cannot even conceive of a more accurate kind of sensation, a truer sensation, then the distinguishing mark that *Besonnenheit* allows us to learn about an object is the only possible representation of the object. Furthermore, the word of characterization, which is synonymous with the distinguishing mark, is not arbitrarily created. The relationship of the word of characterization to its referent is logically oriented, as the word is the representation of the quality that

³⁶ Here again Herder reminds the reader of the concern within the Rousseau that the use of our rational mind is a destruction of “true” or “natural” perception. Herder believes this theory to be quite preposterous, and makes this apparent throughout the *Abhandlung*. Again, we must think of how this aspect of Herder’s argument cannot be subject to the same kind of analysis as Rousseau’s epistemology at the hands of de Man. Herder’s epistemology simply does not conceive of the possibility of an unnatural kind of perception.

the individual believes makes the object different from other objects. So, while Herder's assertion that both the external and internal languages were logically and non-arbitrarily created was initially made problematic by the simple refutation of the non-arbitrariness of external language, according to Herder's epistemology, it seems admissible that internal language is non-arbitrary.

The issue of arbitrariness or non-arbitrariness in internal language reveals an understanding of language that is unique to Herder's argument in the *Abhandlung*. Internal language, as something that is completely contained within the individual, as a non-arbitrary creation, which functions to signify the distinguishing mark of an object, serves a very different purpose from language as Condillac and Rousseau conceive of it. While it is true that for all three authors the development of the human mental faculties is heavily dependent upon the creation of language or of the sign, Herder stands alone in his conviction that language is a tool of differentiation and denomination first, and an external tool of communication second. The word of characterization must exist prior to the creation of the word of communication, because the word of communication functions only as an externalization of, or assistant in the discovery of, the word of characterization. The use of external language for Herder only makes sense in concert with the assumption that all other humans, too, have an internal language and already have the ability to form their own words of characterization. Both Condillac and Rousseau believe language to be predominantly a tool for interaction with others, with Rousseau placing an especially great value on the discursive aspect of language. Herder turns the tables on the French philosophers,

and suggests that while discursive language can facilitate the development of the internal language, it is the ability to differentiate and characterize that is most important to human language. Without the ability to have internal language, and to differentiate, there would be no human knowledge.

Finally, it seems as if the issue of arbitrariness plays an altogether different role in Herder from other authors, as a result of Herder's epistemology. Herder does not really conceive of language as having a relationship to the individual that is at all alike the relationship described in Condillac and Rousseau. For both Condillac and Rousseau, the process of defining of a thing is separate from the application of a term to the thing. They both imagine that language applies a label to things that the mind has already made sense of, and made comprehensible to the human. Herder's epistemology suggests that the moment at which we know a thing through *Besonnenheit*, we have, in the process of determining the defining mark, and thereby becoming aware of the thing, created the word of characterization. So, as I demonstrated in the discussion of external language, the relation between a word and its referent might be 'arbitrary;' as in 'there is no universally known reason to call *tree* 'tree.' I do not imagine that Herder could truly demonstrate that all language has some representative-mimetic quality. But, simultaneously, language is also not arbitrary, because what creates the sign in the first place is also what allows us to even conceive of the existence of the object— the thing is only perceptible once you make the differentiation/determination through *Besonnenheit*. For Herder, because the thing and the sign for the thing become known to the human simultaneously, and

because they are, at least within the mind of the individual, the exact same thing, the characterization of a sign as arbitrary or non-arbitrary becomes irrelevant. Language exists as a creation ordained with the power of *Besonnenheit* within the individual, and, as a result, Herder's internal language is representative of more than just the application of a term to something that exists in the world.

In Herder, we see the creation of an epistemology that defies the possibility of an unnatural perception of the world around us, because it is as a result of us that there is a world to characterize as natural or unnatural. We also learn that our perception of the world makes an understanding of our language through terms of arbitrariness or non-arbitrariness impossible. These two unique results of Herder's *Abhandlung* are chiefly due to Herder's answer to "Reason;" *Besonnenheit*, the distinctly human capacity that allows the human to conceive of the world around her in the first place is the only reason that there is a world at all. It is due to *Besonnenheit* that the binaries of true or untrue, better or worse, and natural or unnatural, to which perception in the works of Condillac and Rousseau was subject, become irrelevant and inapplicable to perception in Herder. Each person conceives of their own reality entirely as a result of their own ability to know that they sense anything at all. Herder's epistemology reminds us of our physical and instinctive weakness, but celebrates the fact that it is purely as a result of this weakness that we are able to know anything. Herder sets forth an epistemology that, despite certain missteps and shortcomings, reveals that the world exists only because we, individually make it exist. It is important to notice that this defining aspect of the *Abhandlung* does not mean to suggest that the

world exists only for the individual. Indeed, Herder acknowledges that social interaction and external language exist, and facilitate in the human development of the ability to differentiate, and create the world. Herder imagines that all humans, in the use of their external language, rely upon the assumption that all other humans have a similar way of processing the external world, and creating their own internal world—which they too have created on their own through *Besonnenheit*—through that processing. So, while Herder’s epistemology does conceive of reality as being a creation of each individual, and a creation that is based on reflective perception that defines everything through the qualities that are differentiated by the mind of each individual, it does not reject there being a world outside of the individual. The world that exists in the minds of others is simply a world that we have absolutely no capability of conceptualizing, or of ever experiencing.

Conclusion

Herder's work is, for both its time and toay, an amazing text that opens up lines of inquiry into numerous elements of the human condition that Condillac and Rousseau left closed and untouched. Where Condillac, in order to support his intense empiricism, asserts a constant presence in universal perception which our mind then interprets, Herder redefines perception to be only what our mind can interpret. Herder redevelops sensation from a tool for allowing the world into the mind of the human into a tool that, as a result of the mind of the individual, allows the world to exist at all. Where Rousseau conceives of language as an external tool solely used for communication which depends on, and helps develop further human knowledge, Herder imagines language to exist in both the internal and the external life of the human. Herder presents a theory of language that complicates the human condition as conceived of by Rousseau, as language for him does not limit itself to interaction and speech. Herder's *Abhandlung* contains a much more complex and rigorously defined epistemology that grounds all understanding of the world firmly in human experience, which does not conceive of the possibility of a true or false understanding of the world. There is only the understanding that has been afforded to us by means of *Besonnenheit*.

One problematic element of Rousseau's understanding of how humans make sense of the world around them is found in the *Discourse*. If we remember the Oak tree analogy from the *Discourse*, Rousseau imagined that the initial process of determining was one based solely on acknowledging difference in

objects. Each tree was labeled as A, B, or C because humans were able to identify that they were different objects, and that they did not represent the same qualities or sensations for the individual. Herder's epistemology up to this point is largely aligned with Rousseau's, even if the way that we perceive the world is different; they both believe that the process for determining what things are individually is a process of identifying what is different about the object from other things, from that which surrounds the object. However, after arguing that the initial definition of a thing comes from a process of determining difference, Rousseau describes the secondary process of conceptual or grouping language creation as being a very different process. Rousseau imagines that once we have identified a large number of things, and identified them as different, we begin to see some qualities that are present in a large number of things (Rousseau, *Discourse*, 149). It is as a result of the determination of this quality of sameness that we then define all these originally differently labeled things as part of a group; A, B, and C become trees, after we know enough trees and see similarities between certain trees, and some become oak trees. In the determination of groups, Rousseau falls prey to the assertion that there are some kinds of essential qualities that are present within a large group of objects, which allow us to refer to groups. Rousseau, in asserting that there is some property of sameness that can unite the different things under a single term, imagines there to be some form-like qualities that are identifiable within multiple objects. The assertion that there is some kind of essence, some kind of presence that can unify objects openly denies the reality that each object is made up of different materials, that each oak tree has qualities of difference that

have been made invisible by the assertion that they adhere to a group of sameness. This is not to say that for Rousseau the concept contains, or is the essential quality. Rather, it is the conceptual sign that allows for the identification of the essential quality, and through use of a terminology based on this essential quality, causes the user to miss the different qualities of the object by replacing them with a perceived sameness. Herder has an epistemology that avoids this issue. Herder does not in any way imagine that there could be a kind of form that unifies things by similarity. For Herder, in the moments where we might refer to different things by the same name we must still identify the elements of difference that make them each a separate object. Unless we don't perceive objects at all, we cannot escape the reality that we only know them by differentiating them from each other and everything else from the other sensations that affect us through a quality of difference. If we refer to things by the same term, it is because they are different from the world in the same way for us. They have the same relationship to us as individuals, not because they have some identical quality, but because they are different from all other things in the same way. Herder's epistemology does allow for the possibility of definition by anything other than differentiation. Furthermore, Herder's epistemology allows the argument that the external language of communication is the only form of language where we resort to the use of one word to define many objects, as a result of the fact that it uses words that only point out qualities of difference to others.

It is a result of the creative, generative quality of language, and Herder's own open-ended style of addressing problems, that the *Abhandlung* differs from

Derrida and de Man's works in how it engages with the writings of Condillac and Rousseau.³⁷ Derrida's text aggressively deconstructs Condillac's epistemology, "works ... at ruining the whole system" of the epistemology discussed within the *Essay*, and reveals "what will be perceived as an internal opposition, contradiction, or deficiency" (Derrida, *Archeology*, p.49). Derrida's deconstruction tears apart Condillac's intricate epistemology, and leaves the reader in a state of aporia, wherein we learn that the use of any language that purports to represent identity is frivolous, and that "we escape frivolity only at the semantic risk of nonidentity" (*Archeology*, p.128). De Man's *Allegories*, too, heavily deconstructs the epistemology of Rousseau in a similar way by destroying the possibility of belief in an objective conceptual language. While the *Allegories* eventually comforts the reader in asserting that, due to the impossibility of escaping metaphoricity in language and society, we should accept the fact that it is the only kind of language that we can ever know, it still invites a negative valorization of the language, by revealing that it is only a metaphorical understanding of the world, a "[suspension] between fiction and fact" that is treated as fact (de Man, *Allegories*, p.151).

³⁷ Herder often will suggest arguments with a brief phrase or rhetorical question, and then, almost coquettishly, say that he has neither the time or the space to refer to the issue, as his work does not focus on that matter. Herder, while he clearly has thoughts on these matters, which often can be guessed at and determined by a reading of the main argument, leaves interpretation up to his reader, and invites further investigation of related theories. Herder seems to invite his readers to use his analysis of Condillac and Rousseau to develop their own understanding of his and their epistemology.

Herder's arguments, which he presents as corrections of the epistemologies of the French philosophers, address issues within their texts in a much more constructive, or perhaps, reconstructive—if I may use the term—way than do those from the *Archeology* or the *Allegories*. Herder determines that there are problems with how Condillac and Rousseau depict how humans perceive the world around them, and develops his own theories from their mistakes.³⁸ Herder however does not do this simply by suggesting that their assumptions are wrong or problematic, or make it apparent that our understanding of the world is poor. He uses the problems in their epistemologies to determine what elements of human language and perception need to be reevaluated, and what elements need to be completely rebuilt. Herder, while he makes numerous rhetorical suggestions and argumentative feints, does not leave the reader in a state of aporia at the end of the *Abhandlung*. We are presented with a very clear picture of how the world is created by all individuals, and we are given a complete, new epistemology that gives us a new answer to every problem that it identifies.

Perhaps it might be noted that de Man's analysis does not leave us in as much of a state of confusion as Derrida's does, and while I do not disagree, I believe that there is a key difference that separates what Herder does to reconstruct human epistemology from what de Man does. The difference in the

³⁸ Perhaps impolitely, but again in his playful way, Herder labels Condillac's work "a hollow explanation of the origin of language" which has argued "badly," and almost mockingly presents Rousseau as a wise man who has severely blundered in his attempt to explain language (Herder, *Abhandlung*, p.101-3). Herder refers to Rousseau's argument in the *Discourse* as "no more than an air bubble which for a while he keeps blowing ahead of himself but which not even he can prevent from unexpectedly bursting as he proceeds along his way" (*Abhandlung*, p.114).

result of Herder and de Man's reconstruction of epistemology that results from their respective analyses of Rousseau is not found in the fact that they both present a solution, but in what the solution entails for human perception.

De Man resolves that, according to Rousseau's epistemology, we exist in a world where we cannot criticize the subjective metaphorical nature of our language, because there is no non-metaphorical language to compare it to. The result of the chapter concerning metaphor in Rousseau in the *Allegories* is that there is not a worse nor a better language that humans could aspire to, and therefore we should resolve that the metaphorical language to which we are bound is applicable to all things, even conceptual topics. Herder, on the other hand, believes that language truly is the point of genesis of the world for humans, and to some degree the reason that there is a world altogether. *Besonnenheit* is what allows humans to have any knowledge of the world, because it creates the world for humans. Language is, correspondingly, not a metaphorical production that leaves the possibility of a non-metaphorical language present within the mind of the reader. Language, as it is the direct manifestation of *Besonnenheit*, is both the representation and the creation of the thing and the differentiating qualities that make it. For de Man, the physical world exists whether or not we know of it, and sensations are still perceived without their being translated into language. For Herder, without the process of *Besonnenheit* there would be no concept or sign of world to refer to, and while physical things might continue to affect non-perceiving instinctively driven animals, there would be no animal that knew even of its own existence. Effectively, the world, as it would never be sensed, would not

exist. Language and *Besonnenheit*, for Herder, become the point of genesis of the world, and the very reason there is existence to refer to.

Johann Gottfried Herder's *Abhandlung* presents a beautiful epistemology of human perception that transcends the human, and to some degree becomes an explanation for existence itself. Herder's relative obscurity in the Western canon is a lamentable fact, and his complete absence from the works of most theory of the 20th and 21st century is astonishing, as his theories correct many of the same issues that these very same theorists have determined to be problematic. It seems a shame that Herder has faded out of the academic consciousness, as the epistemological work of the *Abhandlung* seamlessly reminds us of the subjectivity of the human condition while endowing the human with a significant role, as the very creator of the world.

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