

Misreading Rousseau? Jacques Derrida's Deconstructive Reading of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*

Gerasimos Kakoliris

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Jacques Derrida's engagement with Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the second part of *Of Grammatology* constitutes the most systematic, extensive example of deconstructive reading. Nevertheless, the problem of whether Derrida reproduces Rousseau's basic claims adequately has remained a peripheral concern. This has meant that this may constitute a misreading and the consequences that this would have for the deconstructive operation itself have not adequately examined. Hence, this enquiry into Derrida's reading of Rousseau centers upon the extent to which Derrida distorts Rousseau's text in order to be able to confirm deconstruction's radical theoretical positions.

Keywords: Derrida, Rousseau, Deconstructive Reading, Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Derrida's *Of Grammatology*

1. Deconstructing the Essay: Rousseau and Language

According to Jacques Derrida, the history of metaphysics has always repressed the written sign and conceived language according to the metaphors of self-presence and the voice (what he calls as "metaphysics of presence"). In order to reveal and contest this repression, Derrida dedicated himself, during the 1960's, to a series of immanent readings of philosophers as Rousseau, Plato, Hegel, Husserl, Levi-Strauss, and others. These readings sought to show that every attempt to subordinate writing to the immediate expressiveness and full-presence of speech always presupposed a prior system of writing which was in conflict with that subordination. In this presentation of the degradation of writing within the history of metaphysics and his subsequent deconstruction of this history, the "example," which is accorded the greatest attention and centrality, is that of Rousseau, which occupies almost all the second part of *Of Grammatology*. Derrida's reading focuses in particular on two of Rousseau's texts, the *Confessions* and, especially, the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.

For Derrida, Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* treats the written sign as an external *supplement* to vocal sign. The written sign is devoid of any essential relation to what it means; it is absolutely "exterior" to its "meaning;" it is simply an external "substitute," and, thus, it *differs* radically from what it signifies, while it *defers sine die* our encounter with it. Moreover, Rousseau finds, according to Derrida's reading of the *Essay*, speech closer to the very origin of language and, thus, a more "natural" form of expression than writing. He treats writing with a strange distrust not only as merely derivative, but also, in a certain way, as an "unnatural" way of expression. Derrida links this position to Rousseau's philosophy of

Gerasimos Kakoliris, lecturer, Dr., Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, Pedagogy & Psychology, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece; main research field: Contemporary French Philosophy (Derrida, Foucault, Levinas, etc.), Theories of Reading, and Theories of Hospitality.

human nature, namely, his belief that humanity has fallen from a state of divine grace into the bonds of political and civilized existence. Language constitutes an indicator of the extent to which human nature has been corrupted and divided against itself by the process of civilization.

Derrida's ultimate aim is to show that Rousseau *contradicts* himself in certain parts of his text in such a way as (rather than proving that speech is at the origin of language and that writing is merely a parasitic development) finally to affirm the priority of writing over speech. In the inescapable improprieties that Rousseau commits in expression, in the conclusions he reaches despite his intentions, Derrida finds a tangible confirmation of his own theoretical positions, which is elaborated in the first part of *Of Grammatology*.¹ Each time Rousseau wants to say one thing he ends, for Derrida, by saying something else, thereby, effectively opposing the underlying intention of his argumentation. This happens not through some minor oversight, some accidental failure by Rousseau to pose his case clearly or to perceive its problematic drift. For Rousseau's case is a characteristic example of that thinking that necessarily confronts its limits on each occasion that it attempts to define some origin or "natural" state of language. Thus, the key-concepts of deconstruction, like those of *writing*, *supplementarity*, or *différance*, seem not only to be adequately explained, but also to explain by themselves all those things which Rousseau's text ends up by saying against its programmatic declarations on the issue of the origin of language, the relationship between nature and civilization and writing and speech. These "non-concepts" are not only produced "unconsciously" by Rousseau's discourse, but they also explicate why it is doomed to failure from the start, that is, why it takes this strange turn against the intentions which animated it. Derrida finds the strange motif of "supplementarity" running through the entirety of Rousseau's *Essay* which twists its intended meaning. Rousseau cannot *mean what he says* (or to *say what he means*) at certain crucial moments of the *Essay*. The *Essay* succumbs to a type of twisting, in this reading, which prevents it from accomplishing the logic of its own declared intention.²

2. Speech and Writing

According to Derrida's reading of the *Essay*, language is, for Rousseau, an indicator of the degree to which nature has been corrupted and divided against itself by the false affectations of civilization. What must have come first, Rousseau argues, was a language of the passions, which had not yet formed itself into sophisticated grammatical structures needed for the articulation of abstract thoughts. It was a *natural* language, an authentic medium of expression, still unaffected by other more refined ways of speaking. This language would be located at the furthest possible distance from writing, if, by writing, one understands a highly developed totality of cultural conventions through which language manages to communicate from a distance, without the advantage of face to face contact. Language would need to resort to the "dangerous supplement" of writing only when it put an end to this co-originary relationship between speech and self-presence.

For Derrida, Rousseau constructs—on the basis of the dominant logocentric motif of the voice-as-presence that valorises the priority of speech to the virtues of an innocent, transparent self-knowledge—an opposition between a "natural" language, which remains close to its source as passionate linguistic enunciation, and "artificial" languages in which passion is submerged by the rules and the mechanisms of linguistic convention. The initial, "natural" language is situated in a geographical "South," with a culture, which remains more or less indifferent to progress, and the grace and innocence of origins is expressed by this language. In the passionate, melodic, vowel dominated languages of the South, one finds speech still close to its origin. The "artificial" languages are identified with those "Northern" characteristics which, for Rousseau, signify the effect of

civilization. Passion is surmounted by Reason and social life is subordinated to the forces of economic organisation. In the North, one finds languages marked by a rough and heavy structure of *consonants*, which, though it renders them more effective as communicative instruments, widens the gap between feeling and meaning, instinct and expression.

Rousseau associates the threat of writing with the multiplication of “articulations” through which language extends its communicative power. The more complex language becomes, the more it depends on articulation which renders writing possible. Rousseau interprets it as an absolute loss, as a fall from this state in which speech was perfectly joined to passion.

Derrida undertakes the deconstruction of what he sees as a mythology of presence by following the strange “graphic of supplementarity” (*OG 246/DLG 349*)³ which seems to condition the entirety of Rousseau’s text, and to defer any resort to the idea of origins. This deferral indicates that there is no thinking regarding the character of language, of history, of culture, or social relations that would not have always already presupposed the fall to writing, to *différance*,⁴ or to supplementarity. More precisely, language, for Derrida, from the moment that it passes beyond the state of the primitive cry, is “always already” marked by writing, or those signs of an “articulate” structure which Rousseau deems decadent and corrupted. In Rousseau’s historical thinking, speech in its imaginary plenitude of meaning seems to be divided at its source by the supplement of writing. Thus, while, Rousseau “*declares what he wishes to say, that is to say that articulation and writing are a post-originary malady of language; he says or describes that which he does not wish to say: articulation and, therefore, the space of writing operates at the origin of language*” (*OG 229/DLG 326*). Hence, the notion of the “supplement”—determining here the notion of writing as descriptive image—shelters two meaning whose cohabitation is both strange and necessary. The supplement adds itself; it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude. According to Derrida, this kind of supplementarity determines in a certain way all Rousseau’s conceptual oppositions. But, the supplement is added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack in that which was deemed self-sufficient, complete in itself. The possibility of the addition of the supplement indicates that that which is supplemented is always already *incomplete* or *insufficient* (*OG 145/DLG 208*).

Rousseau, on Derrida’s reading, presents the evils of articulation and writing as ones which have “come upon the origin unexpectedly,” overwhelming the innocent community of speech *a posteriori* (*OG 215/DLG 308*). However, the manner in which Rousseau presents this case opens a different perspective which places this deviation of language at a point prior to all articulations of origin: “What does Rousseau say without saying, see without seeing?” (*OG 215/DLG 308*) That “[t]he becoming-writing of language is the becoming-language of language” (*OG 229/DLG 326*). Rousseau’s text can then only conceive language and society in terms of difference, supplementarity, and the absence of presence. Rousseau does not want to think in these terms, but he is obliged to do so by the logic of his own arguments.

For Derrida, Rousseau confronts this characteristic problem when he makes the attempt to describe the essence of that original language which remains unaffected by the correlative power of articulation and writing. Thus, Rousseau’s conceptualization of the nature of language is impossible without the recognition that articulation and writing were there, from the beginning, as part of the natural resources of language. On this basis, the fall from a “natural” language to the supplement of writing has always already occurred, and this “event” will be marked even in those passages in which Rousseau attempts to describe what this language would be if civilization had not imposed its foreign, artificial values. In this attempt, therefore, Rousseau will instead confirm that there is no language beyond that point at which language is *inscribed* for the first time in

the strange non-original “logic of the ‘supplement’” (*OG 7/DLG 17*).

What Rousseau’s text *describes* as “writing” does not, thus, constitute language *solely* at the point of its historical decline, but is the state of *all* language. Rousseau is obliged indirectly to recognize (manifesting itself in the “blind spots” and the contradictions of his text) that language is inconceivable without the supplement of articulation, or the deviation from origin, something that eventually determines the possibility of its progress. Thus, Rousseau’s quest for the “origin” of language presupposes an existent productive movement which has already severed language from such an original presence. This “supplement,” according to Derrida,

is inserted at the point where language begins to be articulated, is born, that is, from falling short of itself, when its accent or intonation, marking origin and passion within it, is effaced under that *other* mark of origin which is articulation. According to Rousseau, the history of writing is indeed that of articulation. The becoming-language of the cry is the movement by which spoken plenitude begins to become what it is through losing itself, hollowing itself out, breaking itself, articulating itself. The cry vocalizes itself by beginning to efface vocalic speech. (*OG 270/DLG 381*)

The “supplement,” as Derrida notes, is what simultaneously signifies the lack of a “presence,” or a state of plenitude forever beyond recall, and *supplements* this lack by putting in motion its own economy of difference and deferral (*différance*).⁵ It is nowhere present in language, but it is everywhere presupposed by the existence of language as a pre-articulated system.

3. Assessing Derrida’s Reading

Derrida locates Rousseau’s characterisation of writing in the fifth chapter of the *Essay*, entitled, “On Script.” Here Rousseau claims:

Writing, which would seem to crystallize language, is precisely what alters it. It changes not the words but the spirit, substituting exactitude for expressiveness [*L’écriture substitue l’exactitude à l’expression*]. Feelings are expressed in speaking, ideas in writing. In writing, one is forced to use all the words according to their conventional meaning [*dans l’acception commune*]. But in speaking, one varies the meanings [*les acceptions*] by varying one’s tone of voice, determining them as one pleases. Being less constrained to clarity [*être clair*], one can be more forceful [*il donne plus à la force*]. And it is not possible for a language that is written to retain its vitality [*vivacité*] as long as one that is only spoken (*Essay 21-22*).⁶ (*OG 315/DLG 443*)

Then he carries on remarking that,

Words [*voix*], not sounds [*sons*], are written. Yet, in an inflected language, these are the sounds, the accents, and all sorts of modulations that are the main source of energy for a language, and that make a given phrase, otherwise quite ordinary, *proper only to the place where it is*. The means used to *overcome* [*suppléer*] this weakness tend to make written language rather elaborately prolix; and many books written in discourse will enervate the language. To say everything as one would write it would be merely to read aloud (italics added). (*Essay 22*) (*OG 280-1/DLG 397-8*)

The “expressiveness” of language is substituted, through alphabetic writing, for “exactitude.” It replaces the expression of the emotional drive, of the passion that is found at the origin of language: “man’s first motives for speaking were of the passions” (*Essay 12*). “Sounds,” “intonation,” “accent” are the elements which keep passions and feeling alive within the generality of concepts. The expressive power of passions is better represented by the phonetic, and not the consonative, element of language. The emotional drive cannot be expressed by a language which has replaced accent and vowels with a plethora of articulations and consonants. Although the particularity of the subjective emotional drive is distorted within the generality of the concept since speech is founded upon concepts which are the result of connections, the generality of the

concept is limited in favour of the particularity of impulse through accent, intonation, and melody that speech possesses: “A tongue which has only articulations and words has only half its riches. True, it expresses ideas; but for the expression of feelings and images, it still needs rhythm and sounds, which is to say melody, something the Greek tongue has and ours lacks” (*Essay* 51).

In the case of writing, we substitute “accent marks” for “intonation” in vain: “It is mistaken to think that accent marks can make up for oral intonation. One invents accents signs [*accens*] only when intonation [*l’accent*] has already been lost” (*Essay* 24-25). Hence, it is the difference between “accent marks” and “intonation” that highlights the difference between writing and speech.

Derrida will respond to Rousseau’s “attack” against writing, by showing that what, at an explicit level of argumentation, is insistently *declared* to “corrupt” language, is simultaneously *described* as constituting a fundamental condition of its possibility (*OG* 229/*DLG* 326). According to Derrida, Rousseau identifies the advent of corruptive writing with that stage of linguistic development at which language has “excessively” developed articulation (*OG* 245/*DLG* 348). Derrida undertakes to restore writing *through the restoration of articulation*. Hence, while Rousseau, according to Derrida, *would like* articulation to be conceived as a “supplement” which came to be added to language *a posteriori* as an “accident,”

[h]e describes it however in its originary necessity. This unhappy accident is also a “natural progress.” It does not come unexpectedly upon a constituted song, nor does it surprise a full music. Before articulation, therefore, we now know, there is no speech, no song, and thus no music. Passion could not be expressed or imitated without articulation. The “cry of nature” (second *Discourse*), the “simple sounds [that] emerge naturally from the throat” (*Essay* 4), do not make a language because articulation has not yet played there. “Natural sounds are inarticulate” (*Essay* 4). Convention has its hold only upon articulation, which pulls language out of the cry, and increases itself with consonants, tenses, and quantity. *Thus language is borne out of the process of its own degeneration.* (*OG* 242/*DLG* 344-5)

However, despite what Derrida’s reading attributes to Rousseau, Rousseau *does not want nor intend to say* that articulation happens to language *a posteriori*. On the contrary, he *does* declare expressly that articulation is there from the beginning. This becomes clear from the following passage from the *Essay*, which remains curiously absent from Derrida’s reading of Rousseau:

With the first voices came the first articulations or sounds formed according to the respective passions that dictated them. Anger produces menacing cries *articulated* by the tongue and the palate. *But the voice of tenderness is softer: its medium is the glottis. And such an utterance becomes a sound.* It may occur with ordinary or unusual tones, it may be more or less sharply accented, according to the feeling to which it is joined. Thus rhythm and sounds are borne with syllables (*italics added*). (*Essay* 50)

Therefore, it is Rousseau himself who explicitly *declares* that it is articulation which gives birth to language, opening up speech as an institution that is born from passion even though it is articulation, which eventually, in a later phase of linguistic development, through its multiplication, will lead speech or language in general, to silence.

Nevertheless, Derrida will seek additional support for his reading through reference to another passage from the *Essay*, in which Rousseau seems, according to Derrida, to attempt to describe how the character of the “first language, or the “ideal of the language of origin” would be (*OG* 243/*DLG* 346). The “first language,” characterized by rhythm and intonation, is neither the result of material needs nor a product of an industrious logic, but results from impulses and feelings, and the awakening of desire:

I do not doubt that independent of vocabulary and syntax, the first tongue, if it still existed, would retain the original characteristics that would distinguish it from all others. Not only would all the forms of this tongue have to be in images, feelings, and figures, but even in its mechanical part it would have to correspond to its initial object, presenting to the senses as well as to the understanding the almost inevitable impression of the feeling that it seeks to communicate.

Since natural sounds are inarticulate, *words have few articulations*. Interposing some consonants to fill the gaps between vowels would suffice to make them fluid and easy to pronounce. On the other hand, the sounds would very varied, and the diversity of accents for each sound would further multiply them. Quantity and rhythm would account for still further combinations. Since sounds, accents, and number, which are natural, would leave little to articulation, which is conventional, it would be sung rather than spoken. Most of the root words would be imitative sounds or accents of passion, or effects of sense objects. It would contain many onomatopoeic expressions (*italics added*). (*Essay 15-16*) (*OG 243/DLG 345*)

From this passage, and in relation to the *Essay* as a whole, “Rousseau’s declared intention” is, according to Derrida, “to speak of origin and zero degree... Rousseau would like to separate originarity from supplementarity...” (*OG 243/DLG 345*). In this way, for Derrida, the “ideal of the language of origin” is presented, by Rousseau, as that stage of language in which, although language “has broken with gesture, need, animality, etc.,” it “*has not yet* been corrupted by articulation, convention, supplementarity” (*OG 244/DLG 346*).

But why does Derrida claim that Rousseau’s “declared intention” is to separate originality from supplementarity, that is, the “first language” from articulation, when it is explicitly and clearly *declared* in the *Essay* that this “first language,” which, although it has not lost contact completely with its previous stage, that of the inarticulate natural voice, includes the supplement of articulation? On the basis of what textual evidence does Derrida reach the conclusion that Rousseau’s “declared intention” is to efface from this first language the element of articulation? Is it not Rousseau who explicitly *declares*, in the passage, suppressed on Derrida’s reading, that, “[w]ith the first voices came the first articulations” (*Essay 50*)? Furthermore, in the passage that Derrida offers as evidence of the exclusion of articulation from the “first language,” he states that “[s]ince natural sounds are inarticulate, words have few articulations” (*Essay 15*). Rousseau says “few articulations;” he does not say that this “first language” had “no” articulations at all. He never speaks about a language that would be free of articulations.

The only language that is free of articulations is the language of gestures, which is a mute language. Without denying the existence of supplementation, that is, the presence of the supplement of articulation even within this “first language,” Rousseau notes that this language has not yet lost its vitality, something that will happen at a later stage of its development, through the multiplication of the always already existing articulations, a process that will eventually render possible the appearance of alphabetic writing. Hence, at the beginning of the next chapter, entitled “On Writing,” Rousseau writes:

Anyone who studies the history and progress of the tongues will see that the more the words become monotonous, the more the consonants multiply; that, as accents fall into disuse and quantities are neutralized, they are replaced [*supplée*] by grammatical combinations and new articulations. But only the pressure of time brings these changes about. To the degree that needs multiply, that affairs become complicated, that light is shed [knowledge is increased], language changes its character. It becomes more regular and less passionate. It substitutes ideas for feelings. It no longer speaks to the heart but to reason. For that very reason, accent diminishes, articulation increases. Language becomes more exact and clearer, but more prolix, duller and colder. This progression seems to me entirely natural. (*Essay 16*) (*OG 244/DLG 347*) (*OG 270-1/DLG 381-2*)

By treating articulation and language as two mutually incompatible possibilities in Rousseau, Derrida outlines a “contradiction” that plays a fundamental role in his deconstructive reading of the *Essay*:

What are the two contradictory possibilities that Rousseau wishes to retain simultaneously? And how does he do it? He wishes on the one hand to *affirm*, by giving it a positive value, everything of which articulation is the principle or everything with which it constructs a system (passion, language, society, man, etc.). But he intends to affirm simultaneously all that is cancelled by articulation (accent, life, energy, passion yet again, and so on). (*OG* 245-6/*DLG* 349)

Yet, describing this “first language,” Rousseau, not only explicitly *affirms* “everything of which articulation is the principle or everything with which it constructs a system (passion, language, society, man, etc.),” but, also, articulation itself, since it is articulation which offers the possibility for the expression of that “quality of passion,” which cannot be expressed by “inarticulate voices,” and an example of which is erotic passion: “Anger produces menacing cries articulated by the tongue and the palate. But the voice of tenderness is softer: Its medium is the glottis. And such an utterance becomes a sound” (*Essay* 50).

At this stage, language has not yet broken away from the passions, so it is still possible for a harmonious coexistence between a *partly* articulated language and the passions, which this language can express. Therefore, in this situation, Rousseau can *affirm simultaneously, without falling into contradiction* all those things, which presuppose articulation for their existence, including articulation itself, as well as all that which, in a *later* stage, “is cancelled by articulation (accent, life, energy, passion yet again, and so on).”

Within the history of human language, which is, as Jean Starobinski points out, the transition “from a first to a final silence (*d’un premier à un dernier silence*),”⁷ there is at the interim, a certain moment of plenitude, both linguistic and emotional. This stage represents, for the history of language, a point of equilibrium and happiness. From that point onwards, language becomes enmeshed in a plurality of articulations and conventions. At this stage, these bonds of articulation and convention, although they already exist, still remain incorporated in the expression of passion and feelings, thereby constituting a state of harmonious coincidence. These bonds will subsequently lead humans from expression as the non-continuous succession of moments—something that constitutes the main characteristic of their early existence (i.e., gestures)—to a condition of achievement of duration (as this is expressed by speech). Swept along by this movement, language will become a chain of modulation, it will become *discourse*.

Although in the past, it was sufficient for a human being, in order to express his needs satisfactorily, to use gestures, now, where emotions animate his soul, he has to make recourse to the fluctuations and the intonations of the voice. The instantaneous gesture is adequate for someone who wants to show her hunger or thirstiness; but “when it is a question of stirring the heart and inflaming the passions” (*Essay* 8), then she has to add the temporal rhythms brought about by speech to the gestures.

But when it is a question of stirring the heart and inflaming the passions, it is an altogether different matter. The successive impressions of discourse, which strike a redoubled blow, produce a different feeling from that of the continuous presence of the same object, which can be taken in at a single glance. Imagine someone in a painful situation that is fully known; as you watch the afflicted person, you are not likely to weep. But give him time to tell you what he feels and soon you will burst into tears. It is solely in this way that the scenes of a tragedy produce their effect. Pantomime without discourse will leave you nearly tranquil; discourse without gesture will bring tears from you. (*Essay* 8-9) (*OG* 239-40/*DLG* 341)

It is obvious that Rousseau is well aware of the capabilities of gesture and, in many instances, prefers the movement of the body or the hands to speech. Nevertheless, he recognizes the specific difference of the *temporal* order which characterizes speech.

It is at this moment of the passage from gesture to speech that Derrida views the emergence of “one more” *contradiction* into which Rousseau seems to fall:

1. Rousseau speaks the desire of immediate presence. When the latter is *better represented* by the range of the voice and reduces dispersion, he praises living speech, which is the language of the passions. When the immediacy of presence is *better represented* by the proximity and rapidity of the gesture and the glance, he praises the most savage writing, which does not represent oral representation: the hieroglyph. 2. This concept of writing designates the place of unease, of the regulated incoherence within conceptuality, both beyond the *Essay* and beyond Rousseau. (*OG 237/DLG 338*)

Immediately before the passage in which speech is extolled for its ability to “express” and provoke emotions in opposition to signs, which are placed on the side of “exactitude,” it is signs which are praised for their ability to express the passions:

Since learning to gesticulate, we have forgotten the art of pantomime, for the same reason that with all our beautiful systems of grammar we no longer understand the symbols of the Egyptians. What the ancients said in the liveliest way, they did not express in words but by means of signs. They did not say it, they showed it. (*Essay 6*) (*OG 236/DLG 336*)

Yet, if Rousseau can be, without falling into contradiction, on the one hand, affirmative towards writing, while, on the other hand, disapproving when he connects it, as Derrida claims, “with the loss of passionate energy, with need and sometimes with death” (*OG 239/DLG 340-1*), this is because he refers to two different types of writing: *hieroglyphic* and *alphabetic* writing.

In fact, the *Essay* distinguishes three different types of writing, which correspond to three separate stages of linguistic and social development. The “primitive way of writing,” which did not “represent sounds, but objects themselves,” is that of hieroglyphics. It “corresponds to passionate language, and already supposes some society and some needs to which the passions have given birth” (*Essay 17*). The second way of writing “represents words and propositions by conventional characters;” such as the writing of Chinese. The third, which is directly opposed to the first, is that of alphabetic writing, which breaks down “the speaking voice into a given number of elementary parts, either vocal or articulate, with which one can form all the words and syllables imaginable” (*Essay 17*). These three ways of writing are not only judged differently by Rousseau, but also not all set in opposition to speech. Therefore, Rousseau does not fall into “contradiction” when, on the one hand, he defines hieroglyphic writing as the “language of passion,” while, on the other, he connects writing as alphabetic writing “with the loss of passionate energy, with need and sometimes with death.” Moreover, in this passage, Rousseau explicitly juxtaposes *signs* to *letters*. When Derrida claims that Rousseau treats writing as the “language of passion” while, at another point, “he contradicts himself;” when “he places writing on the side of need and speech on the side of passion,” he does not pay sufficient attention to the latter’s distinction between these two different kinds of writing—hieroglyphic and alphabetic writing.

We can now return to the first “contradiction” that Derrida identifies in the *Essay*, that is, Rousseau’s initial praise for the language of gestures and signs at the expense of speech, which is then suddenly inverted with speech coming to occupy the position of privilege: “Rousseau unexpectedly reverses the order of the demonstration: *only* the spoken word has the power of expressing or exciting passion” (Italics added) (*OG 239/DLG 341*). Here, Derrida’s statement that it is “only” speech, which “has the power of expressing or exciting passion” is starkly contrasted with the manner in which Rousseau ends the paragraph cited above:

The passions have their gestures, but they also have their accents; and these accents, which thrill us, these tones of voice that cannot fail to be heard, penetrate to the very depths of the heart, carrying there the emotions they wring from us,

forcing us in spite of ourselves to feel what we hear. We conclude that while visible signs can render a more exact imitation, sounds more effectively arouse interest. (*Essay 9*) (OG 239-40/DLG 341)

Therefore, it is *not only* speech, which expresses the passions; it is *also* gestures: “The *passions have their gestures*, but they also have their accents.” Yet, it is sounds, which “more effectively arouse interest.” This is because the language of gestures, as is also the case with writing, lacks accent. Also, the language of gestures has not yet won time; it lacks duration: “The successive impressions of discourse, which strike a redoubled blow, produce a different feeling” (*Essay 8*). This will lead Derrida to view the Husserlian model of “autopathy” as emergent in the case of Rousseau:

Voice penetrates into me violently; it is the privileged route for forced entry and interiorization, whose reciprocity produces itself in the “hearing-one-self-speak,” in the structure of the voice and of interlocution... Within the voice, the presence of the object already disappears. The self-presence of the voice and of the hearing-oneself speak conceals the very thing that visible space allows to be placed before us. The thing disappearing, the voice substitutes an acoustic sign for it which can, in the place of the object taken away, penetrate profoundly into me, to lodge there “in the depth of the heart.” It is the only way of interiorizing the phenomenon; by transforming it into *akoumène*... Speech never gives the thing itself, but a simulacrum that touches us more profoundly than the truth, “strikes” us more effectively. Another is ambiguity in the appreciation of speech. It is not the presence of the object which moves us but its phonetic sign. (OG 240/DLG 342)

Yet, Derrida’s puzzlement at Rousseau’s position on speech is clear. And this is because, while, on the one hand, the identification and tracing of the structure of autopathy in Rousseau’s argument render him an adequate candidate for his incorporation into Western metaphysics, on the other hand, his elevation of the vocal sign over the presence of the thing itself creates problems for this strategy of incorporation. The fact that Rousseau privileges the vocal sign in relation to the presence of the thing itself places into question Derrida’s claim that his discourse is subordinated to metaphysics of presence. Also, it places into question Derrida’s claim that the supplement is treated by Rousseau’s text as secondary, as being inferior to the thing, which it comes to supplement. Derrida will try to circumvent this obstacle by presenting Rousseau as being critical towards this “complicity between voice and heart” (OG 240/DLG 342). This is because the “substitution” of the thing itself by the vocal sign, the truth by the “simulacrum,” “installs a sort of fiction, if not a lie, at the very origin of speech” (OG 240/DLG 342). Yet, it is doubtful whether it is possible to attribute to Rousseau such a negative assessment of the nature of the vocal sign *solely* on the basis of the following passage, which Derrida adduces as evidence: “The successive impressions of discourse, which strike a redoubled blow, produce a different feeling from that of the continuous presence of the same object... I have said elsewhere why feigned misfortunes touch us more than real ones” (*Essay 8*) (OG 240/DLG 342). Yet, the premise that “feigned misfortunes,” through their excessive use of the voice, have the capacity to be more moving than the vision of a real misfortune, is not asserted as a disapprobation, but as proof of the claim that the vocal sign is more effective for the stimulation of feelings than the presence of the thing itself. Nevertheless, for Derrida, Rousseau’s mistrust is not only taken as given, but it also explains Rousseau’s “nostalgia for a society of need that Rousseau disqualifies so harshly elsewhere. Dream of a mute society, of a society before the origin of languages, that is to say, strictly speaking, is a society before society” (OG 240/DLG 342). This claim is based on the following passage from the *Essay*:

This leads me to think that if the only needs we ever experienced were physical, we should most likely never have been able to speak; we would fully express our meanings by the language of gesture alone. We would have been able to

establish societies little different from those we have, or such as would have been better able to achieve their goals. We would have been able to institute laws, to choose leaders, to invent arts, to establish commerce, and to do, in a word, almost as many things as we do with the help of speech. Without the fear of jealousy, the secrets of oriental gallantry are passed across the more strictly guarded harems in the epistolary language of salaams. The mutes of great nobles understand each other, and understand everything that is said to them by means of signs, just as well as one can understand anything said in discourse. (*Essay 9*) (OG 241/DLG 342-3)

We can now see what really belongs to Rousseau's text, and what Derrida's reading arbitrarily adds to it. His assertion that "while visible signs can render a more exact imitation, sounds more effectively arouse interest" leads Rousseau to conclude ("This leads me to think...") that *if* we had to express *only* natural needs, visible signs would be adequate by themselves. Hence, Rousseau does not show any preference for a mute society, a society which would be based exclusively on the language of gestures. His discourse is strictly assertive (connotative). Yet, this does not prevent Derrida from concluding, based on the above assertion, that, for Rousseau, "[w]ith reference to this society of mute writing, the advent of speech resembles a catastrophe, an unpredictable misfortune. Nothing made it necessary. At the end of the *Essay*, this pattern is exactly inverted" (OG 241/DLG 343). How would it possible for Rousseau to affirm a mute society limiting itself solely to the expression of "physical needs," when he insistently defends a society based on passion? Hence, in the beginning of the next chapter entitled "That the First Invention of Speech Is Due not to Need but Passion," Rousseau will state that "It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passion stimulated the first words" (*Essay 11*).

Rousseau's developmental schema shows a preference for that phase of the historical development of language and society when, although articulation has already appeared as the originary possibility of language (the expression of passions supplemented by the intensity and the duration which characterize the expressive medium of speech), language has not yet severed its links with passion and feelings. The crisis of language will appear later through the hyperbolic growth of consonants and articulations, and the disappearance of the accent resulting from phonetic writing. In his reading of Rousseau, Derrida fails to perceive this stage of linguistic and social development which unites articulation and accent in a non-contradictory manner, with the result that Rousseau is held to contradict himself when he attempts to "affirm" all those things which articulation creates as well as all those which it effaces.

In these first languages, rhythm and accent dominate. These languages are not the product of material needs or reason; they are connected to the impulse of feelings and the awakening of passions. Rousseau places the birth of language not in the process of the productive activity, but in those moments of leisure and expenditure which interrupt active life. Rousseau's originality consists in making language well up from a spring full of emotion. In the intervals between work (work that has not yet become slavery), festivities are improvised. The rhythm and the tone of the first languages are inseparable from bodily verve and vivacity.

In that happy age when nothing marked the hours, nothing would oblige one to count them; the only measure of time would be the alternation of amusement and boredom. Under old oaks, conquerors of the years, and ardent youth will gradually lose his ferocity. Little by little they become less shy with each other. In trying to make oneself understood, one learns to explain oneself. There too, the original festivals developed. Feet skipped with joy, *earnest gestures no longer sufficed*, being accompanied by an impassioned voice; pleasure and desire mingled and were felt together. There at last was the true cradle of nations: from the pure crystal of the fountains flow the first fires of love (my italics). (*Essay 44-45*)

At this stage, people distinguished themselves from nature; they came close to each other; they abandoned their initial speechlessness; and they were no longer satisfied with instantaneous cries. Yet their language, both musical and poetical, does not constitute an element of disjunction. It authorizes the expressive communication of passion and feelings, and perfect, mutual understanding. Despite the fact that such a language already allows the existence and development of articulations and consonants, it has not yet given birth to the absence of passion and feelings; it still remains in their service. The subject has not yet fallen victim to mediations (to the “intermediate”), which he will develop in the future, and which, by finally freeing themselves from their role as mediators in communication, will be transformed into a cover, a veil between civilized people.

Language remains inseparably bound to the body of the passionate subject itself. It maintains the remembrance and the force of the archaic onomatopoeia; it still has the immediate persuasive power of the “voice of nature.” Yet, it is, also, capable of determining, beyond the speaking subject, the autonomous existence of a reality conceived by thinking. Even though articulation is responsible for the deviation of language from a primary immediacy, it provides it with an instrument (an intermediate), capable of restoring this immediacy. As Jean Starobinski claims, in singsong speech, which is the first speech, even though we have already overcome,

the wild cry of the origins (without phonemes and accent), however, we are still very far from the impersonal language of the civilized human beings, which disappears within the generality of the signified, which abandons the speaking subject, a language which is under the domination of its mechanical function and its external aims, an impersonal language.⁸ (1971, 375)

Therefore, Derrida fails to perceive that Rousseau’s simultaneous *affirmation* of both those elements which have articulation as their condition of possibility and those elements which, through the multiplication of articulation, will be threatened in the *future*, is *not* contradictory. For, Rousseau refers to a certain stage of linguistic and socio-historical development, which can harmoniously accommodate all of them: this is the linguistic ideal that corresponds to the happiness of a “new-born society.” Hence, Rousseau is not dismissive of articulation in general, since he does not hesitate to *state* explicitly that articulation constitutes a central element in the “language of passion.” He is, rather, critical of the unrestricted multiplication of articulation, which deprives language of its ability to express passion and feelings. Moreover, the intentional or unintentional acknowledgement of the fact that articulation has invaded and determined language from the beginning, that it is always already at the origin of language, does not necessarily deprive Rousseau’s criticism of its force in relation to an overarticulated language. Although articulation constitutes a condition of possibility for language, a language, which has *too many* articulations, is lacking in “expressiveness.”

After describing the appearance of the first intoned language, the *Essay* becomes the history of a progressively and ineluctably deepening separation. Speech will lose its force, through the disappearance of its fluctuations and accent; it will become logical, cold and monotonous. The depth and extent of the depravity of existing societies and languages will be assessed according to the extent to which they differ from this archetype or ideal. The *Essay* ends with the reminder of a final catastrophe, where the civilized world has been overwhelmed by idle talk, bragging, and garrulousness. The modern idioms, so ornate and flexible, are no longer able to be used to transmit content full of passion and liveliness: “[our tongues] are made for murmuring on couches. Our preachers torment themselves, work themselves into a sweat in the pulpit without anyone knowing anything of what they have said” (*Essay* 73).

4. Evaluating Derrida's Restoration of Writing

Through this critical reconstruction of the deconstructive enterprise, the central question becomes whether the relation between writing and speech has been plausibly transformed into one in which writing as *articulation* is found at the origin of language as its condition of possibility. Yet, as it has been shown, Rousseau does not blame phonetic writing for being articulation. Writing is accused of being an *overarticulated* language; in the case of *alphabetic* writing, accent, intonation, and prosody have been entirely subsumed by articulation with the result that language has lost all its expressive resources. In contrast to writing, speech, and indeed only the passionate speech of the warm climates, the South, is still able to maintain the element of accent. Indeed, for Rousseau, it is not speech in general that is praised and elevated in relation to alphabetic writing. Speech can be subject to the same evils as alphabetic writing. Rousseau does not attempt to create a binary opposition between speech and writing in general. For example, in his history of the development of languages, Rousseau contrasts the passionate languages of the South with the dispassionate languages of the North (*Essay* 48-49) (*OG* 226/*DLG* 322).

Hence, in his deconstruction of Rousseau's *Essay*, Derrida has attempted to redeem writing-as-articulation, as *arche-writing*, as *différance*, namely, as that which divides immediate presence, and, thus, renders both speech and writing in their traditional meaning possible. However, what finally happens to alphabetic writing, to writing in its traditional sense, which is *not*, in fact, accused of being articulation, but of representing that stage of linguistic development, in which, accent has been entirely substituted for the multiplication of articulations, losing, in this way, its contact with passions and feelings? If speech has supremacy over writing, it is not because it is free from the element of articulation—Rousseau never claims such a thing—but because it can retain its contact with passions and feelings through accent.

Deconstruction would have accomplished its aims sufficiently if what concerned it was to show that the essential distancing from origin—of which writing is traditionally considered a sign—constitutes a characteristic of language in general. Yet, for Rousseau, the objection to writing and articulation is not that they are responsible for the distancing of language from its origin or for substituting presence for absence or immediacy for mediation (speech as a *medium* of expression in itself could be blamed for the same reasons), but because they gradually *accentuated* this distancing, something which finally resulted in the clear and definite separation of language from its origin (i.e., passion and feelings). Speech is considered superior to writing, not because it excludes articulation, but because it retains *accent*, which is related, by Rousseau, to the expressiveness of passions and feelings. In this sense, the aforementioned determinate difference between speech and writing remains intact in the work of deconstruction, since what deconstruction is solely preoccupied with demonstrating is that writing as articulation is found at the origin of language. Hence, the accusation of its lack of expressiveness is still in effect:

Words [*voix*], not sounds [*sons*], are written. Yet, in an inflected language, these are the sounds, the accents, and all sorts of modulations that are the main source of energy for a language, and that make a given phrase, otherwise quite ordinary, uniquely appropriate. The means used to overcome this weakness tend to make written language rather elaborately prolix; and many books written in discourse will enervate the language. (*Essay* 23) (*OG* 281/*DLG* 397-8)

The demonstration of a certain distancing of speech from its origin—which renders speech, in this sense, a kind of writing—is not sufficient to efface its difference from the traditional concept of writing, since this difference is related to the ability of speech to express passion through the medium of accent, something which

writing cannot do: “A tongue which has only articulations and words has only half its riches. True, it expresses ideas; but for the expression of feelings and images it still needs rhythm and sounds, which is to say melody, something the Greek tongue has and our lacks” (*Essay* 51).

There is no doubt that it would be possible for a critical reading of Rousseau’s *Essay* to contest the claim about the link between accent and passion, or the inability of writing to express passion. This, however, does not constitute the centre of deconstruction’s questioning. Deconstructive reading would be completely successful if writing *as* articulation was really *declared* absent from the origin of language and consequently, deconstruction’s sole concern was to repair this injustice. Yet, we have doubted Derrida’s claim that Rousseau *declares* articulation absent from the origin of language. As we have doubted that the demonstration that writing-as-articulation constitutes a condition of possibility for language is sufficient to obliterate Rousseau’s “injustice” done to alphabetic writing, as to its relation to speech.⁹

Notes

1. The first part of *Of Grammatology* is presented by Derrida as a “theoretical matrix,” while the second part (i.e., Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Rousseau’s *Essay* and the *Confessions*) is presented as an “example” of the first part:

“The first part of this book, ‘Writing before the Letter,’ sketches in broad outlines a theoretical matrix. It indicates certain significant historical moments, and proposes certain critical concepts. These critical concepts are put to the test in the second part, ‘Nature, Culture, Writing.’ This is the moment, as it were, of the example, although strictly speaking, that notion is not acceptable within my argument” (*OG* LXXXIX/DLG 7).

2. In his early texts, Derrida organizes his deconstructive double readings around the distinction between a text’s intended meaning (its *vouloir dire*) and the text itself. A text is stratified, according to Derrida, into *declarative* and *descriptive* layers: the *declarative* relates to “what the author wants to say,” while the *descriptive* relates to what escapes authorial intention. This distinction can also be expressed in other critical languages as the distinction between *programmatic intention* (what the author sets out to say) and the *operative intention* (what the text finally says). See Michael Hancher. “Three Kinds of Intention.” *Modern Language Notes* 87 (1972): 827-51. This stratification then, in turn, relates to the deconstructive text itself, which is accordingly divided into an explicative, and a *deconstructive* phase, whereby a text’s authorial intention or its dominant interpretation is first reconstructed and then deconstructed through what has escaped its control.

Of Grammatology is Derrida’s text where the use, as a critical instrument, of the opposition between what the author wanted to say and what the author actually says, plays the most important role. The reading of Rousseau differs from Derrida’s works on other metaphysicians, if not in kind, then certainly in the intensity with which the deconstructive critic leads the writer into antinomy and aporia. In addition, in this text, Derrida considered it necessary to incorporate authorial intention to his reading in the most visible way, and to widen the gap between *meaning-to-say* (*vouloir dire*) and *saying*. Rousseau *declares* something, but Rousseau *describes* something else: This pattern dominates the text from “The Place of the *Essay*” onwards. The inflexible insistence with which the distinction is used is constantly apparent. Every time Rousseau attempts to set up a priority, whether it is that of speech over writing, nature over culture, melody over harmony, literal over figural meaning, the languages of the South over those of the North—he ends up in an insoluble contradiction.

3. The abbreviation *OG* refers to Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri C. Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976; and *DLG* to Jacques Derrida. *De la Grammatologie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967.

4. Derrida produces the “neografism” of *différance* from the present participle of the French verb *différer*. The verb *différer* has a double sense in French, which is rendered into English by the separate verbs “to differ” and “to defer.” *Différer* in the sense of “to differ” means that something is different from something else; it has a spatial sense, and refers to the non-identical relations pertaining between phenomena. *Différer* in the sense of “to defer” means to postpone the completion of an act; it thus has a temporal meaning, conveyed by the verbs “to temporize,” “to delay,” or “to put off.” The neologism *différance* refers polysemically to both these meanings, the temporal and the spatial. By spelling *différance* with an *a*, not an *e*, Derrida demonstrates that there is a difference between *différence* and *différance* that is inaudible when spoken. For more on the “non” concept of *différance*, see J. Derrida, “Différance.” *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982, 1-27.

5. As Derrida writes, the supplement is “another name for *différance*” (*OG* 150/*DLG* 215).

6. The abbreviation *Essay* refers to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Trans. J. H. Moran & A. Gode. New York: Frederick Unkar Publishing Co., 1966.

7. Jean Starobinski. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, 315/*Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l’obstacle suivi de Sept essais sur Rousseau*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard (Collection Tel), 1971, 371, (translation modified).

8. Ibid., 318/375 (translation modified).
9. I would like to thank Dr. Peter Langford for his invaluable help.

Works Cited

- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri C. Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976/*De la Grammatologie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967.
- Hancher, Michael. "Three Kinds of Intention." *Modern Language Notes* 87 (1972): 827-51.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Trans. J. H. Moran & A. Gode. New York: Frederick Uncar Publishing Co., 1966.
- Starobinski, Jean. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988/*Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle suivi de Sept essais sur Rousseau*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard (Collection Tel), 1971.