How to do things with signs: Rousseau's ancient performative idiom

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Abstract: In various writings Rousseau ascribes to the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Israelites a mostly visual, gestural, and non-semantic idiom of communication: the language of signs. This article examines the performative aspects of this imagined ancient language, while situating it within the context of other eighteenth-century projections of a vivid language of action onto classical antiquity. It is argued that Rousseau's originality lies not only in his emphasis on the performative rather than merely passionate character of this idiom. He also weaved it into a typology of political regimes and performance arts, identifying it with a particular kind of republican politics and public festivals. More generally, the language of signs assisted Rousseau in explaining the establishment of national polities by legendary lawgivers, as well as in fathoming the transformation of human nature in the transition from a state of nature to civil society.

"The most energetic speech is that in which the sign
has said everything before a single word is spoken."
Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin Languages*[1]

It is in his *Considerations on the government of Poland* (1771) that Rousseau elaborated one of his most renowned comparisons between ancients and moderns, suggesting that for modern readers the customs, minds, and deeds of classical Greeks and Romans seem utterly foreign. As he put it, "[W]hen reading ancient history, one believes oneself transported into another universe and among other beings."[2] In short, it seemed as if the ancients possessed a human nature categorically different from that of the moderns. Rousseau's focus in the *Considerations* was on the role of public education in antiquity and its purposeful redeployment in a different form in Poland. His plan included spectacles celebrating national history, spontaneous yet well orchestrated festivals in the open air, public games, and other frequent gatherings aimed at fostering the patriotic passions.[3] Such an instruction of the passions could not be conducted through rote learning or merely prescriptive legislation; it would function only if it employed a unique tool which Rousseau did not discuss in detail in the *Considerations*. In this essay I would like to explore this instrument for the education of the passions, a recurrent theme in Rousseau's accounts of classical and Jewish antiquity: an imagined performative idiom of immediacy and emotion. Only

[1] In Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The *Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249 (henceforth *DI*); *Œuvres complètes* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), ed. Bernard Gagnebin, Marcel Raymond et al (Paris: Gallimard, 1959-1995), V, 376 (henceforth *OC*).
[2] In Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179 (henceforth *SC*); *OC* III, 956.
[3] *SC*, 179-182; *OC* III 956-9.

by using this sort of language could the ancients rise to the heights of their civic achievement, thereby neutralising the detrimental effects of *amour propre* and social alienation. Moreover, I would suggest that the elusive language of signs is at the heart of Rousseau's struggle with the main paradox of the republican tradition: a republican state can only be established if its citizens possess virtue, while it is the same state that is supposed to instil republican virtue in its citizens.[4] The language of signs is one of the ways in which citizens can be made to possess republican virtue while also moulding the institutions that render them virtuous.

As we shall see, the impossibility of recapturing this performative idiom accounts for much of the utopian character of Rousseau's views on the ancients.[5] At the same time, I shall try to link this particular idiom of immediacy to Rousseau's more general theory of language, pointing out the heuristic and regulative value it possessed despite its utter absence and sheer impossibility in the modern world.

I. Crafting a language, forging a nation

Rousseau shared the common Enlightenment view that the distinguishing mark of human language was its artificiality: its man-made character which detached it from the immutable nature of the things it stood for. Yet he did not necessarily celebrate this artificial aspect of human language. Like some of his contemporaries, Rousseau longed for something more natural, which had been lost under layers of human convention and invention. He was well aware that artifice was indeed the hallmark of human, as opposed to bestial, communication; but he saw no reason to equate artificiality (the human crafting of meaning) with arbitrariness. In the primordial language, as imagined by Rousseau, articulate words were few and far between; it was mostly comprised of natural, inarticulate sounds expressing the passions. The conventions of this first idiom were attributable to natural-environmental and historical ("moral") circumstances rather than to arbitrary decisions on the part of self-conscious agents.[6]

Moreover, Rousseau explicitly undermined a different Enlightenment narrative, concerning the natural human development of articulate speech from primordial instinctive cries. One of his main points in the *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) was that the conventional character of human language would have required consensus regarding the meanings of words, an all but impossible act in the absence of speech. The problem was that consent could not have been achieved through

[4] See Frederick Beiser's recent discussion of this 'vicious circle' in relation to Schiller, Rousseau and the republican tradition in his *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123-129.

[5] On the conundrum of using a dreamed-up version of ancient civic life as a model for quasi-utopian national renewal, see Bronislaw Baczko's account of the *Considerations* in *Lumières de l'utopie* (Paris: Payot, 1978), 65-100.

[6] *DI*, 255; *OC* V, 383. On Rousseau's place within an eighteenth-century critique of the arbitrariness of language, see Avi Lifschitz, "The Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign: Variations on an Enlightenment Theme", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73 (2012), 537-57.

deliberation before the emergence of a social sphere. Rousseau went even further, linking this problem to another, "even more difficult to conceive of in itself, since this unanimous agreement must have been motivated".[7] This, in a nutshell, is one of the most fundamental questions in the whole *Discourse on Inequality* and subsequently in the *Social Contract* (1762): how to motivate a unanimous and binding agreement in a legitimate way, without coercing the free agents who are to take part in it.

In Rousseau's works there is an inextricable link between these two issues: the emergence of artificial words from natural cries and gestures, on the one hand, and the motivation of a binding social compact without coercion, on the other. In the *Social Contract* both issues – articulate language and unanimous motivation – bear directly on Rousseau's discussion of the lawgiver in Book II, Chapter 7. This figure has generated much scholarly debate and controversy; such a semi-mythical person, coming from outside the contracting community while configuring its laws by an appeal to divine inspiration, has at times been considered incompatible with an account of voluntary social action along modern lines. For our purposes, however, it would be helpful to emphasise the similarities between the function of the lawgiver in the *Social Contract* and that of the inventors of language in the *Discourse on Inequality*.

Rousseau argued that the task of the lawgiver – which he saw exemplified by Moses, Lycurgus, and Numa – was as challenging as transforming human nature, for he must substitute "a partial and moral existence for the independent and physical existence we have all received from nature".[8] Yet this substitution, or such a modification of human nature, has to be agreed upon – or at least endorsed and loved – by those who were about to experience it. Pre-social human beings knew, however, only one mode of existence, their physical and independent condition, and would not have easily understood why it should be replaced by a life of mutual dependence. As in the invention of arbitrary signs and articulate language, we have here a conundrum of transition between two incommensurable categories: a shift from the natural to the artificial that had to be both motivated and unanimously approved. Just as Rousseau recognised in the *Discourse on Inequality* that the human invention of language was tantamount to saying that "speech seems to have been very necessary to establish the use of speech", in the *Social Contract* he acknowledged that a nascent people could not, of its own accord, agree to the transformation of its nature. If this were the case, "men would have to be prior to the laws what they ought to become by means of the laws".[9]

While in the *Discourse on Inequality* Rousseau maintained, by contrast to most of his contemporaries, that he was not convinced that language could have been established by "purely human means", in the *Social Contract* he emphasised that since "the lawgiver can use neither force nor reasoning, he must of necessity have recourse to an authority of a different order". Referring to the examples of the ancient legendary legislators, Rousseau suggested that the lawgiver could only place his

[7] *DI*, 147; *OC* III, 148.
[8] *SC*, 69; *OC* III, 381.
[9] *DI*, 147; *OC* III, 148-9, and *SC*, 71; OC, III, 383.

words in the mouth of the Gods in order to rally human beings to "freely obey the yoke of public felicity".[10] But in the *Social Contract* Rousseau did not clarify how the lawgiver could achieve this rhetorical feat – how he could appeal to the Gods in order to "persuade without convincing". For as Rousseau himself admitted, the ideas the lawgiver had to impart to the nation could not be translated into its own language. This was an almost perfect parallel with the situation facing the inventors of language in the *Discourse on Inequality*: the people to whom the lawgiver had to speak did not possess the cognitive and rhetorical resources required for the significant shift from a natural condition to an artificial, man-made one. Therefore, a special idiom had to be employed to mould their opinions much more deeply than via rational argumentation.[11]

II. The ancient idiom of signs

Part of the solution to this problem – how to link together the incompatible categories of nature and artifice – was suggested in Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (probably written between 1756 and 1761). Here he suggested that human beings were once able to communicate by means of self-made, artificial yet non-arbitrary signs, flowing directly and naturally from their passions. These signs were indeed motivated, in the sense that they were deliberately and conventionally employed by human agents; yet they were not arbitrary because they had a natural link to what they depicted, and could easily be understood by others. Rousseau called this idiom "the language of signs" as opposed to the modern languages of words.

In response to his predecessors (and especially to Condillac), Rousseau emphasised in the *Essay* that language did not emerge from human needs but rather out of love or from the desire to interact with others. Yet love, as Rousseau noted, "disdains speech; it has livelier ways of expressing itself", as in his example of a girl telling her lover many more things by tracing his shadow than by prosaically declaring "I love you".[12] The language of signs was not simply assembled from the random gestures typical of modern speakers; it was a matter of choosing a symbol that spoke a volume, or transmitted the sense of a message more vividly than words. Rousseau claimed that when the ancients wished to achieve a particularly striking effect, they expressed themselves in signs rather than in words: "they did not say it, they showed it". He found ancient history "filled with such ways of addressing arguments to the eyes", for visual signs produced more certain effects than words – stimulating the imagination, arousing curiosity, and holding the mind in suspense.[13] This argument was repeated almost verbatim in Book IV of *Emile* (1762), where

[10] SC, 71; *OC*, III, 383.
[11] Cf. Michael Sonenscher on Rousseau's social contract: "Its content had to be felt to be recognized, not simply understood as a set of reasoned arguments." (Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 163. See also Jared Holley's contribution to this issue.
[12] *DI*, 248; *OC* V, 376.
[13] *DI*, 249; *OC* V, 376.

Rousseau used the same ancient examples: Tarquinius Superbus cutting off the heads of the highest poppies to signal to his son's messenger that members of the strongest families must be executed in order to pacify his land, and the Scythians sending to Darius a frog, a bird, a mouse, and five arrows, which made the Persian king abandon the battle against them. In the *Essay* Rousseau had also mentioned the Levite of Ephraim who, in order to inspire his fellow Israelites to avenge the rape and murder of his concubine, cut her corpse into pieces which he sent to different tribes. This brutal message achieved the desired effect, as the Israelites decided to wage war on the culprits in the territory of Benjamin (Judges 19-20).[14] In the *Letter to d'Alembert on the Spectacles* (1758) a similar reference was made to the expressive writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast (as recounted in Daniel 5) – a much more effective means of delivering a strong message than its merely verbal communication.[15]

Admittedly, Rousseau was not too consistent in the *Essay* with regard to visual signs. While arguing that they were best suited to stimulate the imagination and transmit love, he also maintained in the same chapter that such signs accounted for accurate imitation while sounds inflamed the passions more easily. Drawing on travel reports of physical idioms in Arabia and India, Rousseau also suggested that human beings could have silently established societies and commerce, chosen their chiefs, and even instituted laws. All this could have been achieved by means of visual signs before a single word was spoken.[16] Yet for Rousseau there was no clear-cut difference between a language of visual symbols and one of audible signs: the main gap existed between these two idioms of signs and the arbitrary, modern language of words.

This point was reiterated in Rousseau's discussion of melody and harmony in the *Essay*. From the outset he distinguished between the moderns' music, theatre, and gestures, and those of the ancient Greeks: the latter could achieve much more than the former, for there was a categorical difference between their idioms. The ancient Greeks could do via gestures and music precisely what the lawgiver had to perform in the *Social Contract*. They could persuade without convincing, or communicate straight into the heart instead of addressing rational argument to the mind.

How and why did ancient music operate so directly? The key, according to Rousseau, was in understanding that sensations did not always affect us merely as physical sentiments but also as signs or images with moral (or social) causes and effects.[17] This assertion becomes clearer in Rousseau's distinction between melody and harmony. Harmony and counterpoint were based on convention, Rousseau argued, and therefore did not appeal to the untutored ear. To the first human beings in the *Discourse on Inequality* or to the nascent nation in the *Social Contract*, harmonious music must have amounted to mere noise. Rousseau explained this argument by appealing to the non-imitative character of harmony. It might be very

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[14] Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 322 (henceforth *Emile*); *OC* IV, 647. See also Rousseau's "Le Lévite d'Ephraïm" in *OC* II, 1205-23.
[15] Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), 121 (henceforth *Letter*); *OC* V, 110.
[16] *DI*, 251; *OC* V, 378.
[17] *DI*, 288; *OC* V, 417.

pleasing if one had learned to appreciate it, but harmony did not signify anything; it did not express the passions. It was melody, by contrast, that imitated the inflections of the voice and thereby managed to express joy, suffering, and threats – what Rousseau called "vocal signs of the passions". Melodious sounds and visual signs did not have a merely imitative or semantic meaning.

This theme is also manifestly present in *Emile* as a treatise on education, for Emile's tutor was supposed to modify human nature in order to prepare a natural man for life under social conventions. And Rousseau made it clear in Book I of *Emile* that "the true education consists less in precept than in practice".[18] In this work it was not the ancient Greeks or Romans but rather children who possessed a natural language before they learned to pronounce words. Rousseau paid much attention to children's gestures and intonations – the whole apparatus of inarticulate communication. He called the infant's tears "the first link in the chain of social order" and recommended several times the examination of the secret meanings of the gesture or the cry, since the wrong interpretation would turn the infant into a tyrant over others or a slave to his passions (instead of his own master).[19] Just like the link between the new nation and its laws, the relationship between the tutor and his pupil must be based on mutual love and consent. Like the lawgiver, the tutor taught more by experience and example than through words. When he did speak, Rousseau explained, the tutor had to talk in such a way that the child's language would be unconsciously modelled upon his example – yet without explicitly correcting the child or coercing him to speak in this manner.[20]

Rousseau's examples in *Emile* and in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* were indeed signs involving not only a reference but also, and more importantly, an intention to bring about a certain situation in the world: the Scythians forced Darius to withdraw and the Levite of Ephraim avenged the death of his concubine. Rousseau's idiom of signs operated in a manner similar to ancient melody, which "not only imitates; it speaks; and its language, though inarticulate, is lively, ardent, passionate, and a hundred times more vigorous than speech itself".[21] The musician or the ancient statesman did not have to represent things via arbitrary means, according to Rousseau: he "excites in the soul the very same sentiments which one experiences upon seeing the things".[22] This immediate representation, functioning by means of "moral causes" that produce "moral effects", is what made the language of signs performative rather than merely semantic. It was an idiom that prompted human beings to change things in the world rather than to contemplate quietly the meaning of what has been shown or sung to them. It persuaded without convincing.

As long as ancient speech was conducted in this language of signs, all was well. The political, musical, and linguistic decline began once speech became separated from gesture and song, at the time when prose and philosophy were

[18] *Emile*, 42; *OC* IV, 252.
[19] *Emile*, 65-66; *OC* IV, 285-8.
[20] *Emile*, 71; *OC* IV, 294.
[21] *DI*, 287; *OC* V, 416.
[22] *DI*, 292; *OC* V, 422.

invented. Rousseau noted that it was then, by cultivating the art of convincing people, that the Greeks lost the ability to move their audience.[23] The link to the *Social Contract* and to the task of the lawgiver is almost explicitly spelled out in the last chapter of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, where Rousseau explained that in antiquity, "persuasion occupied the place of public force" – which made eloquence necessary. Yet by Rousseau's own time, societies and languages had assumed their final forms; things could only be changed by brute force or by cash. Rousseau memorably claimed that one could not address orally in French an audience assembled in the Place Vendôme in Paris, whereas in ancient Greece political speeches, poetry, and even the works of Herodotus were read in public squares in front of much larger audiences.[24]

The performative aspect of the language of signs was further emphasised in *Emile*. There too we encounter an image of the ancients employing symbolic expression for persuading others without coercion rather than uttering arbitrary words to convince their interlocutors. It was in the language of signs that human beings were truly touched and therefore driven to action, Rousseau argued. He added that ancient eloquence did not "merely consist in speeches carefully prepared; it was most effective when the orator said least. The most startling speeches were expressed not in words but in signs; they were not uttered but shown".[25] Judith Shklar and Christopher Kelly have pointed out the similarities between the task of the legislator and the language of signs;[26] I would like to enhance this insight by suggesting that Rousseau's peculiar idiom had to be performative rather than merely emotional or highly passionate. It provided the ancients with the means to perform "speech acts", which Rousseau might well have called "song acts" or "symbol acts". Their performative impact allowed human beings "to do things" in J. L. Austin's renowned phrase – albeit with inarticulate signs instead of words.[27] Indeed, for both Rousseau and Austin, the distinctive features of the language of signs or the performative utterance were their holistic intentionality and non-semantic *force* (beyond meaning and reference). These were not merely statements of fact about the world, but rather utterances aimed at a human public or an interlocutor. As Austin argued, the other person (or the national public, in some of Rousseau's cases) had to perceive the force of the locution beyond its meaning: the performance of an illocutionary act (Austin's most characteristic speech act) and the achievement of perlocutionary effects involved

[23] *DI*, 296; *OC* V, 425.
[24] *DI*, 299; *OC* V, 428-9.
[25] *Emile*, 322; *OC* IV, 647.
[26] Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 156-57 (Shklar focusses much more on the power of the lawgiver's magnetic personality than on his linguistic performance); Christopher Kelly, "'To Persuade without Convincing': The Language of Rousseau's Legislator", *American Journal of Political Science* 31 (1987), 321-35.
[27] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). On the language of signs in the *Social Contract* and *Emile*, see Avi Lifschitz, "Zeichensprache", in *Rousseau und die Moderne. Eine kleine Enzyklopädie*, ed. Iwan-Michelangelo D'Aprile and Stefanie Stockhorst (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013), 339-48.

the securing of uptake.[28] Crucially, both illocutionary and perlocutionary acts could, according to Austin, be brought off non-verbally.[29]

Just like the speech acts in Austin's modern theory, Rousseau's ancient language of signs could not be used in isolation or as a private language; [30] it had to be addressed to someone and intended to pierce the addressee's perception. As Rousseau argued, it was usually aimed at the heart through the eyes rather than at the brain and through the ears. This notion was coupled with Rousseau's basic observation that the sentiments and the will were fired much more easily by the imagination than by reason, and that the best means of stimulating the imagination were signs rather than articulate words. As noted in *Emile*, the moderns have lost the most energetic sort of idiom "in neglecting the language of signs that speak to the imagination". Reason was a restrictive element, not a means to action: "Always to reason is the mania of small minds. Strong souls have quite another language. It is with this language that one persuades and makes others act."[31]

This is, I would argue, Rousseau's way out of the *cul de sac* in which he found himself when trying, in the *Discourse on Inequality*, to account for the origin of language as a purely semantic system. The human transformation required for the shift from nature to artifice corresponded to the change that the lawgiver had to effect, turning naturally independent beings into socially interdependent ones. Only a language of signs aimed at the imagination could inscribe its lessons deeply and irreversibly in human hearts, thereby prompting lifelong attachments and dispositions.

III. Socio-political uses of the language of signs

In his accounts of contemporary regimes with a republican background such as Geneva, Venice, and Poland, Rousseau repeatedly argued that the law alone – as liberating as it was in the *Social Contract* – could never maintain on its own a republican entity or safeguard justice and an ardent love of fatherland. Similarly, it was not material rewards, physical punishments, or any other coercive means that guaranteed the survival of the state and its institutions. The only hope for the downtrodden Poles, Rousseau suggested, was a wholehearted infusion of the nation with emotional attachment to the laws.

> No constitution will ever be good and solid unless the law rules the citizens' hearts. So long as the legislative force does not reach that deep, the laws will invariably be evaded. […] How, then, can one move hearts, and get the fatherland and its

[28] Austin, *How to Do*, 115-16. Cf. the further application of this theory to historical investigation in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, I: *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 145–87.
[29] Austin, *How to Do*, 117-19.
[30] Cf. the so-called "private language argument" in §§256–272 of Ludwig Wittegenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 91-95.
[31] *Emile*, 321; *OC* IV, 645.

> laws loved? Dare I say it? with children's games; with institutions which appear trivial in the eyes of superficial men, but which form cherished habits and invincible attachments.[32]

Accordingly, Rousseau's account of ancient institutions in the *Considerations* was deliberately focussed on the performative aspects of the great lawgivers' endeavours. Instead of analysing Mosaic laws, Numa's sacred books or Lycurgus's actual legislation, Rousseau emphasised what may be deemed their extension of the language of signs from the interpersonal to the institutional level. It is Moses who received Rousseau's highest praise for transforming a band of fugitives into an enduring, cohesive nation. A constitution was only one of Moses's innovations; much more important for the future survival of the Israelites was the fact that the founding lawgiver endowed the nation with "morals and practices which could not be blended with those of the other nations; he weighed it down with distinctive rites and ceremonies; he constrained it in a thousand ways in order to keep it constantly alert" and apart from neighbouring nations.[33] It was not the laws themselves that ensured the existence of the Jewish people after the demise of its ancient state, Rousseau claimed, but rather the accompanying ceremonies and rites.

Lycurgus too did not only create a set of laws. His imposition of an "iron yoke" on the Spartans was successful because he ensured the constant self-identification of his people with their legal and moral constraints. This complete denaturing, or the transformation of human beings from natural entities into wholly social ones, would not have been enduringly accomplished had Lycurgus not made the Spartans love their new form of conduct. "He constantly showed it [the nation] the fatherland, in its laws, in its games, in its home, in its loves, in its feasts." Numa did not unite brigands into a solid political entity by a set of laws but rather by institutions, "so that they eventually sanctified their city with these apparently frivolous and superstitious rites, the force and effects of which so few people appreciate […]"[34] The only way to "show" the fatherland to the Spartans and to create a nation out of the inhabitants of Rome was by engaging them in performance: civic rites, gymnastic education, and military exercise under the mutually watchful eyes of fellow citizens.

As with the more personal aspects of the language of signs, its national version was performative. It did not involve utterances of facts about the world or political speeches concerning the laws; the public language of signs consisted in games, festivals, and exercise in the open air. It had to be intentional on the part of the performers, who secured uptake both among themselves and among their public addressees. It resulted in a "moral effect" very similar to those mentioned in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*: love, yet this time of country rather than of a fellow human being.[35]

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[32] *SC*, 179; *OC* III, 955.
[33] *SC*, 180; *OC* III, 956-57.
[34] *SC*, 181; *OC* III, 957-58.
[35] Cf Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes*, 162-63.

Indeed, to a large extent this was the crux of Rousseau's somewhat perplexing response to the dire condition of the Poles, divided as they were between competing "confederations" and threatened by powerful neighbours: "People should feel entertained in Poland more than in other countries, but not in the same way." ("Il faut qu'on s'amuse en Pologne plus que dans les autres pays, mais non pas de la même maniére.") There followed a list of recommendations for public festivals, civic spectacles, and celebrations – an application of the national aspect of the language of signs to a modern European nation with some republican dispositions. However, performance itself was not sufficient: citizens needed to be shown constantly certain signs and marks of republican virtue in order to inscribe this notion all the better in their hearts. A person destined from birth to lead the nation should not only possess wisdom, genius, or other mental characteristics; these, Rousseau noted, could be hardly discerned by the people in an unambiguous manner. His advice here, as in the more abstract *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, was not to say it – but rather to show it. Current and future leaders should be trained to exhibit physical strength and agility, as well as to demonstrate such visible qualities to the people in public festivals. As Rousseau argued in the *Considerations on Poland*, men of the highest civic rank and their corresponding marks of distinction should be exposed to the nation's eager eyes as frequently and openly as possible.

> Do not neglect a certain amount of public display; let it be noble, imposing, and convey magnificence with men rather than with things. It is hard to exaggerate the extent to which the people's heart follows its eyes and how impressed it is with the majesty of ceremonials. Majesty of ceremonials endows authority with a confidence-inspiring air of order and regularity, and dispels the ideas of caprice and fancy associated with the idea of arbitrary power.[36]

This observation was closely linked to Rousseau's recurrent efforts to enable a unanimous public-mindedness that is also self-willed – a major conundrum, as we have observed, in both the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Social Contract*. The Romans, Rousseau noted, constantly employed a careful *mise en scène* of public life by assembling the people in particular spaces where they were headed in certain directions and towards specific buildings; they also endowed public servants, leaders, convicts, and religious functionaries with clear distinguishing marks. Even the modern Catholic Church and the Republic of Venice, two fallen states in Rousseau's view, owed much of their political endurance to the clever deployment of some remnants of the political language of signs. Despite the somewhat excessive pomp and circumstance of Venetian ceremonies, Rousseau argued that the Doge was still widely admired by the locals – and that the impressive Bucintoro festival would "cause the population of Venice to shed all its blood for the maintenance of its

[36] *SC*, 187; *OC* III, 964.

tyrannical government".[37] The same longing for the performative use of visual and gestural signs was manifest in Rousseau's affectionately reconstructed childhood memory of the public dancing of the Genevan regiment of Saint Gervais after their exercises. The men's ecstatic dance attracted their families and spontaneously developed into an open-air festival on the streets of the republic, which made Rousseau realise that "the only pure joy is public joy" – a lesson he associated with ancient Spartan festivals and would later forcefully recommend to the Poles.[38]

This national application of the language of signs was also part of a general typology of performance arts, which Rousseau mapped onto different sorts of political regimes and gender roles. As elaborated in the *Letter to d'Alembert*, republican vigour required national, , inclusive, and edifying open-air performances; commercial monarchies could do very well, however, with what Rousseau considered the corrupting effects of modern theatre and courtly culture. The former kind of performance had its most obvious expression in Spartan festivals and in republican Rome – where, Rousseau claimed, there was no common place of assembly for the two sexes. The origins of modern theatre were traced by Rousseau back to the barbarian invasions of the early Middle Ages. Carrying women in their armies, the conquering hordes introduced ideas of chivalry and gallantry into public entertainment – the source of the "love interest" which, Rousseau noted, dominated the French theatre of his day.[39] Courtly culture reached its apogee in the plays of Racine and Molière, not to mention the more recent Parisian salons orchestrated and presided over by women. Rousseau went as far as arguing that women – with the exception of Sappho – were not among the very few authors who could still hope to approximate the power of the language of signs.[40]

The love-dominated, complacent, and mollifying modern theatre was the exact opposite of the ancient art of performance through signs. It was conducted in closed spaces, admission depended on a fee, it was socially exclusive, and the fatherland was not its most significant object. In fact, Rousseau was not certain that even in antiquity the theatre had any distinctive, morally edifying qualities. Yet he tended to excuse the Athenians for their incestuous and melodramatic tragedies, as well as for their ridicule-riddled comedies, due to the way in which they were performed. Even if the content was sometimes questionable, the effects were wholesome. As with the language of signs, the question of "how" mattered no less, and sometimes much more, than the "what": "It is the poems of Homer recited before the Greeks solemnly assembled, not in stalls, on stages and cash in hand, but in the open and before the national body", as well as public games and glory-focussed competitions, that fostered emotional attachment to national history, mythology, and the local civic ethos.[41]

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[37] *Emile*, 322; *OC* IV, 646.
[38] *Letter*, 135-6; *OC* V, 123-24.
[39] *Letter*, 89-90; *OC* V, 82.
[40] *Letter*, 103; *OC* V, 94-95.
[41] *SC*, 182; *OC* III, 958.

Rousseau's insistence on a visual-gestural language of signs, accompanied by his oft-repeated emphasis on public ceremonies, festivals, and practices, may of course be read into his discussion of civil religion at the very end of the *Social Contract*.[42] His dislike of modern words, based as they were on mere reason and enforced by crude political power, made Rousseau half-idealise two different models of religion. The first, a "religion of man" – "without altars, without rites, limited to the purely internal cult of the Supreme God and the eternal duties of morality"[43] – was juxtaposed by Rousseau with the Christianity of the Gospel rather than of his day, and elaborated to great effect by the Savoyard vicar in Book IV of *Emile*. The second sort of religion, the creed of the citizen, was identified with the laws, spirit, customs and ceremonies of a single national state. These two kinds of religion were contrasted by Rousseau with a "more bizarre" religion of the priest, which gave men two masters and created a self-contradictory political entity.[44] Despite his somewhat mixed views on civil religion in the *Social Contract*, in most other references to ancient polities Rousseau noted that civil religion – or the weaving together of political action and religious worship – immensely enhanced the resilience of the classical republics.[45] (Its absence was, perhaps, one of the reasons for Venice's sorry condition as a fallen state.) Here too the emphasis was on public practices such as rites, ceremonies, and festivals – all appealing by signs to the most heartfelt emotions and inscribing civic norms in citizens' souls.

IV. Contemporary and ancient contexts

Although Rousseau's account of the religion of man and that of the citizen may seem to chime with a wider eighteenth-century focus on the ethical core of religion at the expense of dogma and confessional formulae, it should be noted that Rousseau's discussion of antiquity – and the role of the language of signs within it – was clearly demarcated from his examination of the ethical religion of man.[46] This is not to argue that civil religion had no ethical aspects in Rousseau's eyes: the difference was mainly in that the religion of man could ultimately be known and elaborated by any right-thinking person through the examination of her or his heart and the human condition. It was therefore of no particular relevance to the sovereign, as long as its practitioners did not disturb their peers or the public peace. The religion of the citizen,

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[42] *SC*, 142-51, *OC* III, 460-69. Cf. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. 11-86.
[43] *SC*, 146; *OC* III, 464.
[44] *SC*, 146-47; *OC* III, 464.
[45] See, for example, the positive elaboration of the relationship between civil religion, laws, and customs in the *Considerations on Poland*: *SC* 181-2; *OC* III, 958-59.
[46] Helena Rosenblatt, "The Christian Enlightenment", in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, VII: *Enlightenment, Reawakening, and Revolution 1660-1815*, ed. Stewart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 283-301;David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 11-14; Simon Grote, "Review Essay: Religion and Enlightenment", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75 (2014), 137-60.

by contrast, involved particular rites, visual symbols, and special melodies which were by necessity limited to a certain nation and territory, and laid down by a wise lawgiver at a very early stage of national history.

As to the power of such non-verbal means of education, Montesquieu had already argued that music had a significant civilising or moralising role in ancient Greece. Seeking to explain in *On the Spirit of the Laws* (1748) this special – dreaded or desired – status of music in antiquity, he argued that it was used to soften the harshness inevitably instilled in the Greeks' souls by their physical exercises and military discipline. For this sort of psychological formation, Montesquieu argued, neither laws nor punishments were called for: "Music, which enters the spirit through the organs of the body, was quite suitable."[47] Similar attention to the visual, musical, and gestural aspects of ancient speech – as opposed to its semantic content – was apparent in Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* of 1746. Inspired by Dubos's earlier discussion of ancient prosody, Condillac claimed that public declamation and theatrical speech were essentially a form of chanting, achieving a much greater effect than our merely spoken discourse.[48]

Having argued that the first human language was a vivid idiom of mixed cries and gestures, a true language of action, Condillac followed William Warburton's references to the uses of this idiom among the ancient Israelites. This was part of Warburton's defence in his *Divine Legation of Moses* (1738-41) of the biblical prophets against the charge of fanaticism and absurdity hurled at them by modern critics. By demonstrating the common use of "significatory action" or "speaking by actions" in ancient Israel, Warburton wished to contextualise prophetic gestures which seemed far too rough and uncouth to some of his contemporaries.[49] Warburton added that this idiom was not limited to the Israelites, for the Delphic oracles were revealed by signs. Moreover, the ancients were generally used to "speaking by action and writing by picture": the first example here was precisely the one later used by Rousseau, of the Scythians sending the Persian king Darius a message comprised of signs instead of words (in this version it was a mouse, a frog, a bird, a dart, and a ploughshare).[50]

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[47] Montesquieu, "De l'esprit des lois", IV.8, in *Œuvres complètes* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), II, 272; *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 41.

[48] "It seems that this language was chiefly preserved to instruct the people in matters that most deeply concerned them, such as government and religion, for the reason that by acting with greater force on the imagination, the impression was more lasting." Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), II.1.10, 118; "Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines", in *Œuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. Georges Le Roy (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947-51), I, 63. Condillac was much indebted to the discussion of the ancient performance arts in Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719), who, in turn, relied to a large extent on Lucian's *De saltatione*; see Aarsleff's introduction to Condillac's *Essay*, xxxiii-xxxiv, and Ismene Lada-Richards, *Silent Eloquence: Lucian and Pantomime Dancing* (London: Duckworth, 2007).

[49] William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, 4th ed. (London: A. Millar and J. and R. Tonson, 1765), III, 108-12.

[50] Ibid., 112-13. This episode also repeatedly appeared as a means of speaking by sensible "real words" (*parole reali*) in *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984): §§48, 99, 435.

Moses Mendelssohn too envisaged ancient Hebrew as an acted and sung idiom rather than one spoken dryly and articulately in the modern manner. In order for language to communicate thought in the best manner, it had to be accentuated. The melodious incantation of some phrases, and the pauses and breaks in speech, were all meant to leave an indelible impression.[51] According to Mendelssohn, the tenets of Judaism had been handed down through lively face-to-face exchange, not via rote learning of scripted instructions. In antiquity the ceremonial law remained largely unwritten, being a "living script, stirring heart and mind" to be observed and imitated by its students, a set of meaningful actions which were the occasion for further reflection.[52]

It is clear, therefore, that Rousseau was not alone in ascribing to the ancients a particularly forceful idiom of visual and gestural signs. The weakness of modern languages and their lack of expressivity – in comparison to the feats achieved by the ancients through their idiom of signs and action – were common *topoi* in the mid-eighteenth century.[53] Yet in Rousseau's works we find not only a greater emphasis on the performative aspects of this ancient language of action. Beyond his attribution of the language of signs to the Israelites, the Greeks, and the Republican Romans, Rousseau associated this language more strictly with certain political structures and dispositions, just as he did in the case of public performances. Condillac, Warburton, and Mendelssohn did emphasise the effectiveness of this visual or sung idiom for political, religious, and educational purposes, but they did not associate it only with a certain kind of republicanism. One of Rousseau's major points was, by contrast, that the language of signs characteristically mirrored the genius of a free, republican nation: national liberty could be attained only by frequent, recurrent use of the language of signs. More generally, Rousseau believed that republican virtue could be best communicated via visual, melodious, and gestural praxis rather than through textual instruction.[54] It is in this respect that the language of signs constituted one of Rousseau's tentative solutions to the conundrum of the primacy of the republic or its

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[51] Moses Mendelssohn, "Or La-Netivah" (the Hebrew introduction to his German translation of the Pentateuch), in *Gesammelte Schriften – Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin/Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt: Akademie Verlag/ Frommann-Holzboog, 1929-), XIV, ed. Haim Borodianski (Bar-Dayan), 218, and vol. IX.1, ed. Werner Weinberg, 16-17.

[52] Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, ed. Alexander Altmann, 169; *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, ed. Alexander Altmann (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 102. See Avi Lifschitz, "A Natural yet Providential Tongue: Moses Mendelssohn on Hebrew as a Language of Action", in *Language as Bridge and Border: Linguistic, Cultural and Political Constellations in Eighteenth- to Twentieth-Century German-Jewish Thought*, ed. Sabine Sander (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2015), 31-50, and "Language as a Means and an Obstacle to Freedom: The Case of Moses Mendelssohn", in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), II, 84-102.

[53] See also Denis Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets à l'usage de ceux qui entendent et qui parlent* (1751); Avi Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 33-36 and 89-91.

[54] Cf. Judith Shklar, "Rousseau's images of authority (especially in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*)", in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 154-92 (esp. 179-86).

virtuous citizens: while the state had to mould its citizens' virtue, it could be established only by the very same citizens already possessing republican virtue.

Mendelssohn's contention that the ceremonial law was not written down in antiquity but rather transmitted through active performance paralleled Plutarch's insistence that the laws of Sparta remained unwritten. In fact, here was another equivalence between the accomplishments of Moses and Lycurgus, not directly discussed by Rousseau but standing at the very centre of his recommendation to the Poles to enhance their patriotism through the orchestration of constant public performances. By not writing down the entire Jewish ceremonial law, Mendelssohn's Moses resembled closely Plutarch's Lycurgus.[55]

> None of his laws were put into writing by Lycurgus, indeed, one of the so-called "rhetras" forbids it. For he thought that if the most important and binding principles which conduce to the prosperity and virtue of a city were implanted in the habits and the training of the citizens, they would remain unchanged and secure, having a stronger bond than compulsion in the fixed purposes imparted to the young by education, which performs the office of a law-giver for every one of them.[56]

Plutarch's Lycurgus wished to achieve effects very similar to Rousseau's goals in his account of the ancient language of signs. Both had to implant certain attitudes and dispositions within the citizen in order to ensure the endurance of these values – and of the republic itself.[57] This was, indeed, the task of the lawgiver in the *Social Contract* – a veritable transformation of human nature. For Rousseau, as for Plutarch's Lycurgus and for Mendelssohn's Moses, a written set of laws could neither achieve nor guarantee what active education through performance, visual example, and ongoing conversation could. Beyond the identification of his language of signs with a particular political form of life, Rousseau's further contribution to this tradition

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[55] Mendelssohn's account of the unwritten law in *Jerusalem* was probably indebted to Josephus's portrait of Moses. See Louis Feldman, "Parallel Lives of Two Lawgivers: Josephus' Moses and Plutarch's Lycurgus", in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. J. C. Edmondson, Steve Mason, and J. B. Rives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 209-42. I am grateful to Melissa Lane for this reference.

[56] "Lycurgus", XIII, in *Plutarch's Lives* (Loeb Classical Library), I, ed. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 241. On the lack of congruence between Plutarch's claim that the Spartan laws were unwritten and most other ancient records, see Melissa Lane, "Platonizing the Spartan *politeia* in Plutarch's *Lycurgus*", in Politeia *in Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. Verity Harte and Melissa Lane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 57-77.

[57] Rousseau testified in the *Confessions* to his childhood infatuation with ancient history and Plutarch in particular, from which he would never be completely cured: "I thought of myself as a Greek or a Roman; I became the person whose life I was reading; when I recounted acts of constancy and fortitude that had particularly struck me, my eyes would flash and my voice grow louder." (Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar, ed. Patrick Coleman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9; *OC* I, 9.) On the Plutarchan character of Rousseau's Socrates, see Miriam Leonard's contribution to this issue.

of education via performance was his elaboration of the ways in which this symbolic idiom had to be performatively employed by free citizens.

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As a creative interpretation of ancient politics, the language of signs had its considerable merits. Yet Rousseau himself seems to have recognised that his proposal for its modern deployment in Poland – "Il faut qu'on s'amuse en Pologne" – had more than a whiff of the "extravagant" about it.[58] It was not only human nature in antiquity that seemed strange to modern observers, but also what could actually be achieved in those times. As Rousseau admitted, Lycurgus's design of public education would have looked thoroughly chimerical in the eighteenth century, had it been written down and transmitted to posterity.[59]

While appreciative of some distinctly modern political and economic developments, Rousseau also acknowledged that the moderns – for better or worse – differed categorically from the ancients.[60] In his eyes, active civic participation in the running of the *polis* had been rendered impossible by inequality and modern politics; the tools for accomplishing the great feats of the ancients had been lost long before the eighteenth century.[61] In this light, not even Geneva had a chance of regeneration. In modern times, Rousseau lamented, sermons were the substitutes of speeches aimed at genuine persuasion. Since societies and languages had already ossified terminally, one could no longer conduct public politics *à l'ancienne*.[62] The moderns could not inspire action by means of symbols representing moral effects; all they had at their disposal were mere words with prosaic, arbitrary semantic references. They could no longer do things with signs; unlike the ancient Spartans and Israelites, they (and we) might only pronounce or write down ineffectual words. Rousseau admitted as much at the outset of *Emile* in the form of an apology issued to his readers: "Not in a condition to fulfill the most useful task, I will dare at least to attempt the easier one; […] and instead of *doing* what is necessary, I shall endeavor to *say* it."[63]

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[58] *SC*, 179; *OC* III, 955; cf. Baczko, *Lumières de l'utopie* (footnote 5 above).

[59] "When one wishes to refer to the land of chimeras, mention is made of Plato's institutions. If Lycurgus had set his down only in writing, I would find them far more chimerical. Plato only purified the heart of man; Lycurgus denatured it." (*Emile*, 40; *OC* IV, 250; Cf. Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 12-32.)

[60] For a recent emphasis on Rousseau's thorough understanding of the workings of modern economics and politics, see István Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, ed. Béla Kapossy and Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), and Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[61] "Public instruction no longer exists and can no longer exist, because where there is no longer fatherland, there can no longer be citizens. These two words, *fatherland* and *citizen,* should be effaced from modern languages." (*Emile*, 40; *OC* IV, 250)

[62] *DI*, 298; *OC* V, 428.

[63] *Emile*, 18; *OC* IV, 264 (my emphases). On the function of the act of writing in Rousseau's works, see Eli Friedlander, *J. J. Rousseau: An Afterlife of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), esp. 95-98.