THE DIVERSEIONS OF HISTORY:
A NON-PHENOMENAL APPROACH
TO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LINGUISTIC THOUGHT

By
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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University
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THE DIVERSEIONS OF HISTORY
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (1996)  
(English)  

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario  

TITLE: The Diversions of History: A Non-Phenomenal Approach to Eighteenth-Century Linguistic Thought  

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NUMBER OF PAGES: ix, 428
ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a critique of the methods and assumptions of the discipline of linguistic historiography -- the study of the history of linguistic thought. Linguistic historiography has grown rapidly since the late 1960s. The formation of a loosely-defined canon of works of language study has been accompanied by the publication of many articles and books and the development of a scholarly superstructure of journals, societies, and conferences whose explicit objective it has been to develop both the practice and the theory of this new field. As I argue in this thesis, however, linguistic historiography remains an area which has yet to theorize its activity radically. Often basing their practice on the history of science, works of linguistic historiography, I argue, tend to assume too readily that "language," the putative subject of the texts they study, constitutes a determinate object of knowledge. In the wake of Ferdinand de Saussure, however, philosophers and literary theorists (curiously, however, not linguistic historiographers) have argued that the nonsemantic aspects of a text such as grammar often function in a manner which is in conflict with the text's semantic element -- its statements. In the difference between these two aspects of language, poststructuralist readings expose a "non-phenomenal" dimension of linguistic operation which, lacking a positive or determinate identity, defies description and, as such, marks a horizon of cognition.
In this thesis I argue that no writer is more likely to confront this limit as absolutely as he or she who writes explicitly about language. For this reason, the significance of the texts which comprise the canon of linguistic history extends beyond that of merely helping us to understanding the development of linguistic science or of illuminating the history of those areas of study with which it has, at various times and in various configurations, overlapped, important as such endeavours may be. In the resistance these texts pose to their own descriptions of their "proper object of study," there is an opportunity for considering language not as a determinate object of knowledge but rather as an indeterminate space in knowledge which, because of its lack of identity is also a site of contest among ideological forces.

Through close readings of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, various works on language by Joseph Priestley, and John Horne Tooke's *Diversions of Purley*, I argue that the representation of language in eighteenth-century meta-linguistic texts is concerned with matters other than the strictly linguistic which, it becomes clear, is not one object of knowledge among others, and that these matters are invariably bound up with questions of class, power, and privilege.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All writing is collaborative but none more so perhaps than the doctoral dissertation. Many have contributed to this thesis, some with the actual writing, others with doing whatever else they could to ensure that I could keep pen to paper. Of my many collaborators, however, a number require special recognition.

Dr. David Clark has been my arch-collaborator throughout the long process of this thesis. His scholarly acumen, critical perspicacity, and, indeed, his friendship, are evident everywhere in these pages. The other members of my committee, Dr. Donald Goellnicht and Dr. Peter Walmsley have been equally supportive not only on this project, but throughout my years in the graduate program at McMaster. I am also grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for granting me a doctoral fellowship for this project.

Finally, I was fortunate to write this thesis in the warm atmosphere of family support. To Joan and Walt Brendon, and all the members of the Brendon family, I owe many thanks, not only for their confidence and support, but also for the many hours I have spent with them while completing this project. To my mother, Marion Alexander, and my father, John F. Alexander, I am indebted for the support and encouragement which allowed me to pursue this goal. To no one is my debt greater, however, than to
my collaborator-in-life, Carolyn Brendon, without whose unfailing enthusiasm and steadfast support, this thesis could not have been completed.
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Introduction:

Towards a Non-Phenomenal History of Language Study

That language is, is not comprehensible.

-- Hans-Jost Frey, "Undecidability"

1. Confronting Language

The rapid growth of linguistics in the 1960s brought with it a freshly-whetted curiosity concerning what had been said and thought about language in the past. Existing histories of language study -- progressivistic, positivistic, and with a tendency to regard their subject in the narrow terms of national traditions -- were too parochial for the more empirical appetites of those familiar with the broadly-defined scope of the expanding science of linguistics. As a result, although they are by no means free of the precursorist and revisionist biases which had distorted previous histories of language study, the majority of the works of linguistic historiography produced since the 1960s have been characterized by an overwhelming desire to understand the linguistic thought and traditions of the past on their own terms, without tracing them to or measuring them against the attitudes of contemporary linguistic science.

The impetus for this thesis lies in my sense that, in emphasizing the social, cultural, and intellectual context of past works of language study, linguistic
historiographers all too readily take the identity of language itself, and with it, the identity of history, for granted. This tendency is most apparent in the almost total indifference which linguistic historiographers have shown towards the dramatic upheavals which have been experienced in literary studies in recent decades under the general heading of "textuality." Their scholarly acumen notwithstanding, most works on the history of linguistic thought published in the Anglo-American world since the 1960s remain -- almost eerily -- untouched by the debates concerning questions of reference, representation, historicity, figurality, and rhetoric which continue to vex and enliven departments of literature. Against this dissonant backdrop, works such as Hans Aarsleff's *From Locke to Saussure* or Julie Tetel Andrensen's *Linguistics In America 1769-1924* are remarkable not merely for the éclat with which they have opened and expanded a new field of study, but also for the astounding confidence with which they have assumed their projects to be unproblematically possible.

This resistance is all the more revealing and bizarre because linguistic historiography emerged at about the same time that the debate over theory was beginning to make a racket in the English-speaking world. There is, in fact, a large degree of overlap between the two areas: as Paul de Man has observed, "The advent of theory... occurs with the introduction of linguistic terminology in the metalanguage about literature" (*RT* 8), a metalanguage derived (as de Man also notes) from one of the figures which linguistic historiographers invariably acknowledge as among the most significant in the field they study, Ferdinand de Saussure. In view of this context, the assuredness
with which linguistic historiographers resist theories of textuality suggests a remarkable reluctance on their part to take the full weight of the complexity of a field of study in which two such overdetermined concepts as language and history come face to face. Linguistic historiography as it is practiced today has yet to address the intricate theoretical questions particular to its activity. It may, in fact, exist in its current form only to the extent to which it avoids these questions, that is, insofar as it avoids confronting language not as a foregone conclusion but as a question.

Linguistic historiography's problem arises, in a sense, from a lack of critical distance between itself and the texts it interprets. Just as Jerome McGann has argued that Romantic scholarship is determined by "an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (1), the study of the history of linguistic thought is framed almost exclusively by an empirical ideology derived from the very eighteenth-century texts and traditions (or at least a certain interpretation of these) which are the subject of much of its historiographical labour. With their practice modelled after the history of science, linguistic historiographers frequently take for granted something that, within the texts they study, is far from a settled question and that, indeed, is often implicitly a source of great anxiety and uncertainty: the notion that language is a positive phenomenon with the ontological status of "an objective fact" (de Man, LHLM 164). Guided by such a "phenomenal" sense of language, that is, by an assumption that there is no aspect of language which is not transparently available to perception and thus to understanding, those historians frequently fail to acknowledge the disturbing possibility that there might
be, at work in the texts they read, a "non-phenomenal" dimension of language, not reducible to the familiar status of a naked fact. As empiricists, linguists and linguistic historiographers ask the question "What is the nature of language?" — then stop as if it is beyond question that language, indeed, "is." Nonetheless, the contours of that question invariably make themselves "felt" in the diversions, caesurae, and displacements which form a kind of counter-memory to empirical studies of language.

Although linguistic historiographers may largely ignore them, there are many intimations in the philosophical, literary, and even linguistic discourses of this century that the phenomenality of language is not something that might be safely or certainly taken for granted. A list of examples will help illustrate the breadth and diversity of thinking concerning this "other" side of language.

- Martin Heidegger speaks of a fundamental dimension of language which, because it does not give itself up to representation (and thus to theory), constitutes an unassimilable horizon of the human. "The essential nature of language," he writes, "flatly refuses to express itself in words — in the language, that is, in which we make statements about language" (*On The Way* 81). But, by the same token, he continues:

  If language everywhere withholds its nature in this sense, then such withholding belongs to the very nature of language. Thus language not only holds back when we speak it in the accustomed ways, but this its holding back is determined by the fact that language holds back its own origin and so denies its being to our usual notions. (81)

- Such a "withholding" or necessary reserve is also evident in Walter Benjamin's notion of *reine Sprache* or "pure language." In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin
describes an "abysmal" dimension of language exposed in translation without the prop of which language ceases to be intelligible. Unavailable to cognition as such, *reine Sprache* consists in the mutually supplementing totality of intentions underlying all languages, but "which no single language can attain by itself" (74).

- Rodolphe Gasché invokes a similarly inscrutable aspect of language in his notion of the "texte brut," a term, he says, referring to "the text before it starts to signify and prior to the established meanings that the community of interpreters has inflicted upon it" ("In-Difference to Philosophy" 265).

- The critic Cathy Caruth describes a non-empirical "prop upon which meaning leans and with which it is immediately confused" (944-5).

- The linguist Émile Benveniste adumbrates a similar dimension in his description of an opening in language (or more precisely, of language) which he calls the *énoncé* or utterance. Although assimilable to neither the physical part of the sign ("saying") nor to its cognitive component (the "said"), the *énoncé* constitutes "the very act of producing an uttered, not the text of the uttered" (*Problèmes 2*: 80, qtd. in Agamben 25).

- Elaborating on this enigmatic distinction, Hans-Jost Frey explains "all saying is always preoccupied with obscuring itself and being forgotten through its adjustment to what it says. By tending away from itself to what is said, saying itself remains unsaid" ("Spume" 258).

- Again, emphasizing what Jonathan Culler calls "language as act over language as representation" ("Reading Lyric" 104), philosopher Giorgio Agamben declares "the
taking place of language is unspeakable and ungraspable. The word, taking place in
time, comes about in such a way that its advent necessarily remains unsaid in that which
is said" (77). We find a similar thought in Heidegger's statement that "Everything
spoken stems in a variety of ways from the unspoken, whether this be something not yet
spoken, or whether it be what must remain unspoken in the sense that it is beyond the
reach of speaking" (On The Way 120).

- Approaching the question of the linguistic "unknown" from the perspective of
psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva posits the pre-significative semiotic chora as the effaced
substrate of the logical, coherent linguistic order she calls the symbolic. Identified with
the flux of bodily drives and pulsions, the chora constitutes the material dimension of
signification without whose heterogeneous excess the articulations of the symbolic would
not be possible. Like the Heidegerrian "rift," the chora is identified as a "rupture." As
the material backdrop against which all discourse takes place, the chora "precedes
evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse -- all discourse --
moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and
refuses it" (Revolution 26).

- Jacques Derrida, with whose thought this blank dimension is perhaps most
readily identified today, speaks of "the irreducible excess of the syntactic over the
semantic" (D 221) as the basis of an undecidability beyond that "caused by some
enigmatic equivocality, some inexhaustible ambivalence of a word in a 'natural'
language" (220).
Echoing Derrida, Frances Ferguson notes that "language always makes the medium of knowledge operate as its own static." This medium, she continues, is "the ontological that continually exceeds any epistemological claims that might seem to be at issue" (117).

In his examination of the "non-convergence of 'meaning' with the devices that produce 'meaning'" (RT 66), Paul de Man confronts in language a nothingness or negativity "more originary than the Not of logical negation" (Agamben 3). He calls this "disjunction between grammar and meaning" "the materiality of the letter: the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensible stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost" (89).

Fredric Jameson describes de Man's notion of the materiality of the letter as an attempt to imagine what language "might look like in our own absence" (248). Unlike the liberation from the strictures of metaphysical tradition promised in the trace and the chora, de Man's is a terrifying, imageless vision in which, Jameson says, language emerges "as some monstrous thing we cannot imagine seeing from the outside -- that nameless alien being we domesticate by means of the more banal anthropomorphic concepts of reasons, choices, motives, leaps of faith, irresistible compulsions, and the like" (249).
These passages will guide us throughout this thesis. Although culled from different texts composed over the span of more than half a century, and representing a variety of different methodological and theoretical approaches, each in its own way casts forth the shadow of something profoundly troubling for the strictly empirical study of language, whether by linguists or linguistic historiographers. In thematizing language as a "rift" (der Riss) as in Heidegger, as a "rupture" as we find in Kristeva, or as the dislocating movement of the Derridean "trace,"7 these texts point to an unrepresentable backdrop of language, cut off from representation but against which our ideas of language, such as they are, are necessarily played out. As that which withdraws, is effaced, or "divert[s] attention from itself to what it says" (Frey, "Undecidability" 132), this "material" aspect of language renders all descriptions or theories of language incomplete allegories of themselves, "semantic voids" which, in Derrida's words, signify not meaning but "spacing and articulation" (D 222). Exploiting the language of Austin, de Man explains "Any speech act produces an excess of cognition, but it can never know the process of its own production" (AR 300), which is to say that any cognition will have a performative dimension that it cannot take as the object of its cognition. Always "there," anterior to anything we might say about language, this excess constitutes an unsurpassable horizon which exceeds and outstrips any theoretical effort we might make to know it. "Thus we always see the nature of language [Sprachwesen] only to the extent to which language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself," writes Heidegger.8
For this reason, "we cannot know language -- know it according to the traditional concept of knowledge defined in terms of cognition as representation" (On The Way 134). Whether conceived of as an excess of the ontological over the epistemological, of the syntactical over the semantic, or in Andrzej Warminski's concise formulation, of "marking" over "meaning" (xxxiii) -- language consists of an exorbitance which anticipates and outdistances every theoretical move we might make to exhaust it. "Language is already there, in advance . . . at the moment at which any question can arise about it," writes Derrida. "In this it exceeds the question" (OS 129n.5), the "question," that is, of what is language? And this excess, we may say, is the devil in the text of language which linguists and linguistic historiographers, although they may ignore it, cannot exorcise.

Heidegger, Derrida, Kristeva, de Man take it as their impossible task to think radically the excess which language "is." The passages I have cited from them will serve as touchstones throughout my examination of the "material" dimension of language which linguistic historiography elides. The illuminating examples they provide, however, are not the only paths to a "non-phenomenal" consideration of linguistics and its historiography. As Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser have observed, radical "negativity can only be described in terms of its operations, and not by any means in terms of a graspable entity" (xii - xiii). Although beyond cognition, the material dimension of language leaves its traces in the caesurae, displacements, and avoidances in the texts which together form a spectral "other" of empirical linguistic historiography. Such
textual disturbances point to something opaque in language's apparent transparency, something not reducible to meaning or assimilable to the trivium of "genesis, continuity, totalization" which Michel Foucault calls "the great themes of the history of ideas," and by which, he says "it is attached to a certain, now traditional, form of historical analysis" (*Archaeology* 138), including the historical analysis of language. "In these conditions," he continues

it is normal that anyone who still practices history, its methods, its requirements and possibilities -- this now rather shop-soiled idea -- cannot conceive that a discipline like the history of ideas should be abandoned; or rather, considers that any other form of analysing discourses is a betrayal of history itself. (138)

And yet, as de Man suggests in "Literary History and Literary Modernity," betrayal is fundamental to the "fluctuating movement of aborted self-definition" (164) constitutive of all historical phenomena: caught between the poles of a fully-present moment detached from history, and the effect of repetition and continuity which that moment generates, any account which reduces history to "an objective fact" is inadequate. What de Man says of literature and literary history is no less applicable to linguistic historiography: "A positivistic history that sees literature only as what it is not (as an objective fact, an empirical psyche, or a communication that transcends the literary text as text) is, therefore, necessarily inadequate" (164). Because historians of linguistic thought writing today tend to share many of the same Enlightenment assumptions concerning language as those which inform the texts they read (and which de Man lists here), those historians frequently fail to acknowledge some of the more disturbing aspects
of those texts. Clearly a history which did not take language at its word would tell a
different story. It would not be preoccupied, for example, with what these texts say
about language or the place of these statements in the history of linguistic thought. Nor
would it treat the term "language" as the sign of a factual, empirical presence, given in
advance and with which that word enjoys a stable and transparent relationship. The
objectivity of the linguistic fact would be considered, rather, as an effect of a "self-
legitimizing" (Clark, LHRF 10) figure (of fact) imposed upon the unrepresentable
heterogeneous excess which language "is." As with any fictional totalization in which
a "confusion of linguistic with natural reality" (de Man, RT 11) occurs, this imposition
would bear an ideological dimension. To read the texts of the history of language study
with an eye to such motivations we would want to consider how the idea of language
functions, both in the texts themselves and in the Enlightenment culture in which those
texts circulated.

For example, in the eighteenth-century texts that I will examine in this thesis,
language functions as a sort of conceptual binding agent against whose identity all other
concepts are propped and from which they thus derive their coherence. Such theoretical
totalization, however, is always subject to ideological motivations, whether they consist
in normative efforts to construct a common-sense view of the world or in counter-
strategies to resist the authority and hegemonic effects of such representations. Before
summarizing my reading of these texts in greater detail, however, it will be helpful to
note how linguistic historiography in even its most scrupulous theoretical self-
formulations evokes the very material dimension of language whose effacement is the condition of possibility of their coherence.

2. Confronting Linguistic Historiography

Giulio Lepschy expresses what seems to be the prevailing attitude among linguistic historiographers when he explains that one of the primary objectives which guided his editorial judgement on the recently-translated, four volume History of Linguistics was a desire to provide "an understanding of what certain societies thought about language, rather than an assessment of their ideas on a scale of scientific progress" (vii). For Lepschy and others, linguistic historiography takes as its proper object of study all theories and attitudes concerning language which have been recorded or reported, regardless of when or where those reflections may have occurred. In approaching their material, linguistic historiographers have sought to determine not just what various theorists have said about language, but also the methods they have employed, the assumptions underlying those methods, and the intellectual, social, political, and even epistemological conditions that have formed the context of those inquiries. While such an approach, in the case of Hans Aarsleff’s work, may have offered a powerful antidote to the overwhelmingly teleological and "Whig" orientation which characterized histories of language study prior to the mid-1960s, methods such as his have also imposed severe theoretical limitations on the discipline. In adopting the history of science as his historiographical paradigm, Aarsleff and those who have followed his example elide the
very complex question of the nature of the object of linguistic study and the difficulties which that question poses for the hope of writing a coherent and comprehensive history of linguistic thought. Is language to be studied in the same manner as scientists study plankton and planets, or even as the social scientist examines unemployment or demographic patterns? Can the history of language study be told as one tells the history of biology or astronomy, or economic or political thought. From what Heidegger, Kristeva, Derrida, and de Man suggest, it would seem not. Linguistics is not one science among others. For one thing, in no other science is our knowledge of a subject an effect of the manner in which that subject exceeds, escapes, and resists cognition. To put this in more mundane terms, linguistics and the history of its study are different from other sciences because in no other science is the object of study also the means of its own description. But while such an observation may be obvious, its consequences, as the passages I have cited suggest, are not.

This is certainly not to say that linguistic historiographers have failed to reflect on their discipline. Since the 1970s, linguistic historiography has developed a scholarly superstructure of journals, societies, and conferences whose explicit objective it has been to develop both the practice and the theory of this new field. But, while important questions are frequently raised in such forums with respect to the appropriate scope and definition of the object of the discipline's study, concerns typically come to rest on contextual and thematic matters related to the desire for a comprehensive reconstruction and representation of "the subject matter" (Berkle 10) of works of linguistic thought.
(whatever that might be — and it is not at all obvious). As one contributor to a recent volume on the history of Western linguistics exhorted his readers, "the linguistic historiographer must reconstruct the theme and its exposition as it is given in a text including the premises, chain of arguments which the author uses and his strategies for convincing his audience" (Berkle 9-10).

Not all linguistic historiographers, however, regard their pursuit in such bluntly reconstructive terms. For example, Julie Tetel Andresen acknowledges "the interaction between linguistic theory and the writing of the history of linguistics" ("Why" 363) as a reciprocally conditioning relationship: on the one hand, she writes, one's "concerns and opinions about the nature and study of language" (History 17) are sure to inform one's "choice of what comes under historiographic purview," something she notes which "is not given in advance" (17); on the other hand, the writing of linguistic history, complete with its dream of comprehensivity, amounts to "another, albeit indirect, way of shaping the study of language, of determining the present view of language by shaping what constitutes the linguistic past" (17).

And yet, in the final analysis, the default position of even a scholar with the theoretical sophistication of Andresen is to invoke the banal terms of self-evidence and to privilege a historiographical practice which ranks the recovery of meaning high among its main objectives. In Linguistics in America, 1769-1924, for example, she maintains

We historiographers think our choices are nevertheless, somehow obvious: we examine any and all texts or practices where language is either directly confronted, expressed, or discussed. The more explicit and overt the
confrontation with language or the discussion of it, the more accessible is the text or practice to historiographic critique. (17)\textsuperscript{12}

It is difficult, of course, to argue with the assertion that the historian of linguistic thought studies texts or practices which concern themselves with, or to use Andresen's more suggestive term, which "confront" language. But as obvious as the historiographer's choices may be, what remains less clear is the question of the nature of this confrontation. Is it merely, as Andresen suggests, that of "serious thinkers about language, past and present" ("Why" 365) with what we, perhaps too familiarly (even in Andresen's terms of "obviousness"), call "language"? Do we, in fact, know what language is? Or in asking the question in this manner do we beg another? Just as anthropology presupposes "Man," the question "What is language?" assumes the prior existence of that which it investigates. Yet nothing could be less obvious, less settled, or less certain than either "Man" or "language." "We seem to assume all too readily," de Man comments, "that, when we refer to something called 'language,' we know what it is we are talking about, although there is probably no word to be found in the language that is as overdetermined, self-evasive, disfigured and disfiguring as 'language'" (RT 13). Nonetheless, in making discussions of language the unifying thread of a historiographical project, do we not inadvertently -- perhaps even necessarily -- ascribe to language a determinate identity and a phenomenal presence which it may not actually possess? Are such histories possible, moreover, only by way of an elision of that which in language and its representations escapes or resists such a reduction to interpretability? Andresen's
formulation renders the relation between "serious thinkers" and language as a collision between two substantives, each impervious to and uninformed by the other. In these terms, the confrontation is necessarily that of a preconstituted subject posited in opposition to language not, for example, in language, of language, or even with language (although Andresen uses the word) or some other relation implying a degree of imbrication between its elements. Focalized through an autonomous, determinate, thinking subject which shares nothing, even negatively, with that which is the object of his or her thought, the historiographer's account of this confrontation "with" language is bound once again to follow a path of thematic and contextual reconstruction. For example, Andresen maintains, "linguistic historiography, in its simplest terms, seeks to elucidate the (often unconscious) assumptions brought by the theoretician/linguist to the study of language in order to understand the inner works of a theory of language" ("Why" 361). Thus, even those "externalistic" historiographies which seek to unearth the intellectual context of a linguistic thinker, do so as a means of recovering the unspoken postulates (but not the unspeakable conditions of possibility) governing his or her confrontation "with" language, and thus serve as a way of piecing together and understanding that text, again, in its entirety.13 Andresen extends the widening net of thematizing comprehensivity to encompass the recovery, by way of comparison, of the essential "concerns universal to thinking about language" (362) and the "common unifying themes" of the "diversity of conceptions of language and the plurality of linguistic activity" (365; emphasis added) of which we have evidence. The ultimate goal of this
exercise, she says, is to help us gain "perspective on what it means to think linguistically" (362). Thus, she writes, "linguistic historiography's job is to weigh and evaluate the insights that linguists have had over time, to discover how these insights are pieced together to form a theoretical whole, and to identify their role in the development of the science" (365; emphasis added).

To what extent, however, do such totalizing projects avoid coming face to face with a confrontation perhaps more fundamental to such texts than that which might obtain between a linguist and his or her object of study? To what degree do they actually beg the question of language itself, taking the phenomenal stability of the object of the linguistic thinker's study for granted, thereby eliding the complex difficulties a problematization of that object (if indeed we would still be able to refer to it as an object) might pose to related concepts such as "history," or even "theory," the determinateness of which are crucial to the efficacy of the historiographer's project? For, through all of the unearthing and recovering which linguistic historiographers perform, language "itself," the reification of which seems a necessary precondition of the assumption of a determinate relation "with" something, remains strangely mute, aloof from, indifferent to, beyond, even outside of cognition. In other words, in order for the linguist to be said to confront language, language must be assumed to possess the self-identity necessary for it to resist the linguist's inquiry. But, if this is so, is it not possible that the history of linguistic thought -- at least when read thematically (i.e. for those "common unifying themes") -- is what Michel Foucault would call a "history of opinion" (Order of Things
75)? Or worse, is it nothing more than the history of a word, the only relation among the occurrences of which through time is that of a morphological similarity, in other words, of a pun? Furthermore, to what extent is "language," as the determinate object which is the prerequisite of a thematically-oriented linguistic historiography, apparent only as an effect of a more fundamental resistance (or confusion), of language (or of something which, for lack of a proper word, we must still call "language") to itself, a confusion -- of "sign and substance" (de Man, BI 136), of "meaning" and "marking" (Warminsken xxxiii), of "linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism" (de Man, RT 11) -- moreover, which makes the linguistic theorist's interrogation possible in the first place?

With these questions in mind, it could be said that the real problem with the historiography of linguistic thought is that it stops at language, precisely the point where it should begin. By the same token, it is also true that a thematic history of linguistic thought is only possible to the extent that it avoids the question of the significance and implications of our ability to identify and name an object called language. As I shall argue, the positing of language as the determinate object of the inquiry of "serious thinkers," arises as a possibility only if one elides that dimension of the texts in question where the fundamental instability of that object is exposed. Such an indeterminateness is apparent, for example, if we bring a certain force to bear on one of Andersen's most suggestive phrases, and consider what it might actually be to "think linguistically."

3. Thinking Linguistically

The apparent confidence in the determinate identity of language which linguistic historiographers bring to the texts they read, is matched by what seems to be their common conviction that the actual purpose of their research is self-evident. But, beyond vague suggestions that we need to know what people in the past have said about language, or that such knowledge will enhance our understanding of modern theoretical linguistics (Lyons 3), or even help establish and maintain the identity of the science of linguistics (Schmitter, qtd. in Andresen, "Why" 359), few have actually explained why they "do" linguistic historiography. As some of the passages to which we have already referred suggest, however, one who has confronted this question is Julie Tetel Andresen. In fact, in a review article which poses precisely this question in its title, Andresen argues that historiography should be central to contemporary linguistics. Its significance, she maintains, is primarily theoretical. "Linguistic historiography is the comparative method of linguistic enquiry" (365), she says: we do linguistic historiography in the belief that by evaluating and comparing different ideas concerning language which theorists have proposed over time and contemplating the relation of these notions to the development of linguistic science as a whole, it will be possible to cultivate a better understanding of "what a theory of language is" (362). Such theoretical knowledge should, in turn, help us to determine "what language is" (362). "The real point to be made here," Andresen asserts:
is that linguistic historiography does not exist as an end in itself, or as a glorification of the past, or even as a justification of the present. It aims to serve the ongoing study of language by studying the structure of language theory. It is a method for gaining perspective on what it means to think linguistically. (362)

Such a "reciprocal" (360) relationship between "the writing of the history of linguistics and the construction of a linguistic theory" is only possible, however, if some sort of common ground can be found between the two, something, she says, which they could be said to "share" (360). Deriving her historiographical paradigm from the universalist and comparative method of generative grammar, Andresen finds this common dimension in the fact that both linguistic historiography and linguistic theory are characterized by a search for similarity in difference: only after each has surveyed its field, eliminated all divergent elements, and considered the remainder, will we know what each properly "is."14

Historiography opens onto the diversity of conceptions of language and the plurality of linguistic activity in order to find common unifying themes just as all current work in linguistic universals (both Chomskyan and Greenbergian) takes within its purview the rich diversity of the world's languages in order to distil linguistic essences. (365)

The kernel of sameness which remains, in other words, after linguistic historiography has done its comparative work, will tell us finally "what it means to think linguistically," and this knowledge will contribute, in turn, to our understanding of the nature of language "itself."15

But what, precisely, does it mean to "think linguistically"? The OED defines the adverb "linguistically" as "in regard or relation to language or linguistics." Applied to
Andresen's phrase, this definition leaves considerable room for confusion. If, for example we take "linguistically" to refer to linguistics, then "to think linguistically" will mean to think about something "in regard or relation to" the principles and methods of linguistic science. Presumably, one will think about language, but this is by no means a given; one may, after all, think "linguistically" -- i.e. according to the categories and methods of linguistics -- about physics, genetics, the unconscious, music, painting, cinema, and even, in the case of zoosemiotics, of animal behaviour or any other field which might be construed as having either a grammatical or semantic dimension. If, on the other hand, we take "linguistically" to refer to language, the emphasis in Andresen's phrase shifts from method to object: to "think linguistically," in this case, will mean to think "in relation or in regard to" language itself, as when Max Müller (to use the OED's illustrative quotation of the word) writes "the similarity of customs . . . among races linguistically related to each other" (emphasis added).

Depending on how we read it then, the phrase, "to think linguistically" stresses either a method of thought but not the object of what that method might be, or an object of thought with no guidance as to how we are to think about that object. Given this choice, it is difficult, if not impossible, to define what it might mean to "think linguistically," at least in positive terms. Properly speaking, "to think linguistically" identifies neither the object of such a thought, nor the method by which some object might be thought. Rather, in its indeterminateness, the phrase strands thought between an object and our means of knowing it, that is, between ontology and epistemology.
The difficulty this phrase poses may seem innocuous, and my comments upon it a quibbling attempt to stir up trouble where none really exists. After all, Andresen's intentions seem perfectly clear! At the same time, however, the possibility of two not-totally-compatible (if not absolutely incommensurate) readings of the phrase in question indicates that there is perhaps something about that phrase which marks an aspect of language which, as Barbara Johnson says, "cannot itself be entirely reduced to interpretability" (6). Furthermore, because it is not necessarily a question of interpretability, the problem with the phrase may not be simply one of semantic ambiguity. Rather, in the choice between ontology and epistemology which flashes up before us when we read it, we confront the imponderable limit which linguistic historiography must efface if it is to produce coherent histories, or reveal the "common unifying themes" and "essences" of linguistic thought.

As we have seen, linguistic historiographers have been highly resistant to the thought of such a limit in language. This resistance is perhaps most conspicuous in the apparent indifference with which they regard developments which have taken place in literary theory over the past three decades, particularly in the work of poststructuralist critics and philosophers. Such a failure to engage with the insights of those working most intimately with literary language is an unfortunate, but also curious omission; curious because, as I have said, poststructuralist theory is informed to a large degree by the thought of Saussure. In his theories of language, Saussure adumbrates a differential element in language whose most radical implications are cognate with the various
descriptions of a non-phenomenal dimension of language which I have described. In the
wake of Saussurean linguistics, philosophers and literary theorists have argued that the
nonsemantic aspects of texts such as grammar and syntax often function in a manner
which is in conflict with the text's semantic dimension, that is, its statements.

In the difference between "meaning" and "the devices that produce meaning,"
poststructuralist readings expose a dimension of linguistic operation which, lacking a
positive or determinate identity (including that of a determinate lack or "negative"
identity), defies description and, as such, marks a horizon of cognition. Broadly
speaking, we might say that, because language is a condition of possibility of knowledge,
it is impossible to know in any sort of absolute way what language "is." Any
proposition, "Language is 'x'," is necessarily preceded and anticipated by what Derrida
refers to as "a sort of promise of originary alliance to which we must have in some sense
already acquiesced, already said yes, given a pledge [gage], whatever may be the
negativity or problematicity of the discourse which may follow" (OS 129 n.5). This
inaugural acquiescence to language is the pledge which, in conditioning language, remains
itself unsaid.

Although this excess, like those "devices that produce meaning," is the backdrop
against which meaning occurs and, as such, the condition of meaning's possibility, it is
not, as Jonathan Culler points out, "coextensive with meaning" ("Resisting Theory"
1578). Andrzej Warminski explains this apparent impossibility in the "Prefatory
Postscript" to Readings in Interpretation:
a word, in order to mean anything at all, has always both to be a carrier of meaning and to serve as a place holder, a syntactical marker, within an order of words: it has by definition no meaning without (a minimal) syntax, and yet syntax by definition, the word as mere place-holder, has no meaning. (xxxix)

In its material dimension, language is "the place-holder or marker of something different from, other than, and devoid of meaning, which is nevertheless the condition of possibility of meaning" (xxxix).

How is this possible? In formulations like this one, critics such as Warminski, Cynthia Chase, and others interrogate the notion of language as a "mere medium" (Ferguson 117) of communication, as that bearer of intentions and mirror of the real which we have said linguistic historiographers take for granted. Such ideas, these theorists say, fail to take account of the fact that "words and phonemes are . . . objects in themselves as well as parts of signs" (Ferguson 117). What sort of object, however, is the question. For although language has a material dimension, the arbitrary relationship of the sensory and cognitive components of the sign means that that materiality has nothing whatsoever in common with meaning. In fact, because of its mysterious status as an object, language actually interferes with our cognition of phenomena, including what de Man calls the "phenomenality of language," that is, the notion that legibility is inherent to language rather than the effect of a trope of intelligibility imposed upon the blank surface of its materiality.

Curiously, however, this interference does not simply impede what de Man calls "the accessibility of reality to cognition" (RT 34). The various empirical formulations
such as those of Bacon, Locke, and the Royal Society, which attribute language's failure to communicate intentions and knowledge to distortions which occur at the level of meaning, ignore the "more original" ontological interference which arises because of language's material dimension. As Frances Ferguson explains, language creates a communication that is always inadequate because the language that would be its mere medium has its own ontological status. By being an object, that is, language always makes the medium of knowledge operate as its own static, the ontological that continually exceeds any epistemological claims that might seem to be at issue. (117)

Meaning does not simply flow to us from the marks and noises of language: the dual nature of the Saussurean sign forbids any such continuity between signifier (or sound-image) and signified (or concept), that is, between the sign's perceptible and intelligible aspects. The notion of the sign is predicated precisely on the arbitrariness of their relationship and the incommensurability of their difference. As object, language neither expresses consciousness nor reflects an autonomous reality consisting of phenomena given in advance of cognition: it makes a noise, it produces a mark, it opens a space. None of these, however, are meaningful in and of themselves. To claim that they are, is to ignore the space of difference which is constitutive of the sign and thus of signification and to appropriate the "syntactical" to the "semantic."

When it comes to language, the mark is all we get. But what we get, we cannot know, at least not properly in the sense of having direct access to its nature through perception. The mark neither conveys nor supports meaning: it resists and interferes with any effort we might make to account for its irreducible excess. This interference,
however, is also the backdrop upon which the spectre of meaningfulness is projected, the signifier, signified, and the referent all deriving their illusory "presence" from the resistance of the blank, material dimension upon which they are imposed. (De Man notes, this "confusion of linguistic with natural reality, or reference with phenomenalism" is precisely "what we call ideology" [RT 11]). The attribution of meaningfulness then does not consist in the intuition of phenomena that give themselves to us to be perceived or read. It is a defensive manoeuvre mounted against the uncertain intelligibility of the brute force of language's material occurrence. This reflex takes place by way of a figurative gesture in which the quality of meaningfulness is conferred upon the white noise of language or, as Warminski puts it, in which we impose "a sense where there is neither word nor sense" (iv). Effaced in this troping, the material dimension of language is available to us only in the interference patterns it creates in the semantic field.

Considered, therefore, from the perspective of a non-phenomenal linguistics, signification occurs in the inexorable conflict between what Chase calls "the material nonsemantic, noncognitive dimension of the referential function and the intentional or figural dimension of phenomenal cognition" ("de Man," 196), that is, between the ontological and epistemological aspects of language. We have already noticed this tension and fluctuation in Andresen's phrase "to think linguistically." But the irreducible space opened in these oscillations exposes something quite different from the "essence" which Andresen invokes that phrase in order to name. To review: Andresen says that we "do" linguistic historiography in order to determine the themes common to all theories of
language. This future knowledge will in turn, she says, reveal "the structure of language theory," thus serving the larger study of language by helping us "gain perspective on what it means to think linguistically." "To think linguistically," then, is the name of the essence of the knowledge which (we are told) will be distilled when this work is done. Andresen's phrase, however, is oddly disfigured by an excess unlike (and indeed hostile to) that remainder of sameness which it names and which she says the comparative method will leave behind after having exhausted its field. As we have seen, the phrase which Andresen employs to identify this yet-to-be determined essence, discloses in its fluctuations the space of an incalculable divergence between the "what" of linguistics -- its ontological subject or what it is about -- and its "how" -- the method by which that subject matter is studied and known. Irreducible to "essence," such a semantic void "signifies" or marks what Derrida has called "the articulated opening" of the opposition between the syntactic and semantic (D 222), that is, crudely, the non-phenomenal conditions of signification. The disruption of sense in Andresen's phrase divulges the asymmetry of the syntactical and semantic functions of language: stranded in a space between the ontological and the epistemological, between being and knowing, Andresen's phrase suggests that language can never produce an adequate or final account of its whereabouts because it consists, in its many aspects, of precisely that space which divides ontology from epistemology. Any such description will be necessarily exceeded and undone by the work of the material, or in the Derridean idiom, the "syntactical" function of language which is its condition of possibility.
In other words, Andresen's phrase demonstrates the impossibility of the knowledge it promises. Unlike the "essence" common to linguistic theories which, we are told comparative analysis will one day yield, it exposes an exorbitant space of difference in the signifying process itself, a breach which interferes with the continuities of form and meaning, the syntactical and the semantic, and the ontological and epistemological which are necessary for any exhaustive description of essence, linguistic or otherwise. But "laws which have no exceptions" (Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar* 115), such as the formulation of the essence of linguistic thought which Andresen envisions, can only be promised or predicted; they cannot properly be known. The authority of prediction -- its ability to create an effect of knowledge -- like that of all performative utterances, arises from the figurative erasure of the contingency of the event of its own occurrence. In the case of prediction, the random material element necessary for utterance to occur, is effaced by a figure of history as an utterly calculated, coherent, and continuous sequence of events. Prediction's reference to the future thus stands in for and diverts us from the incommensurability of the material event of its utterance with the possibility of the sort of knowledge of essences which it promises. Prediction extends the phenomenalization of words and referents which occurs in all signification, to temporality itself. The structure of prediction -- and it is a structure homologous to that of all utterance -- implies that we can know history -- all history -- as we can words and things.
Thus, motivated by its prediction of future knowledge, Andresen’s phrase stands in for the lack of sense it nonetheless marks. Rhetorically, it is a catachresis, that is, a figure for which there is no literal term, and which, in Warminski’s words substitutes "meaning for marking" (xxxiii). Like those "expletives" in dead languages which Samuel Johnson says "pass for empty sounds, of no other use than to fill a verse, or to modulate a period" ("Preface," par. 44), Andresen’s phrase "fills" a space in her theoretical discourse, positing in one gesture the phenomenality not only of language but of history as well. In doing so, it preserves a linguistic historiography based on a phenomenal notion of language such as Andresen describes from the effects of the nonphenomenal elements of language which disrupt the coherence and sense of those descriptions.

As a place-holder, such meaningless stand-ins for meanings, or conceptual "expletives," interfere with the sense they nonetheless prop up. Ultimately, what we make of such moments of static is a matter of how we read -- or don’t read -- these texts. If linguistic historiography may tell us what "it means to think linguistically," it may do so, positively, only by forgetting the abyss which opens before the reader with this catachrestic phrase. And yet this forgetting -- which Warminski describes as "a genuine forgetting, an arbitrary substitution of meaning for marking" (lv) -- is precisely what both enables and characterizes linguistic historiography today, both in terms of how it reads its target texts, and how its accounts of those texts are read. In these texts, the term "language" and its displacements in phrases such as "to think linguistically" function as what Derrida calls "syntactical plugs" (D 221) which fill a space (although always
inadequately and interestingly) and thus make the articulation of a linguistics of essence possible. Such "empty sounds" -- and they will appear under various names in these pages: death, silence, cant -- catachrestically impose "a sense where there is neither word nor sense" (Warminski lv): they are diversions which turn our attention from the "always already" diverted nature of the sign, alibis which plead the presence of language, but always place it "elsewhere." Such terms function, paradoxically, as the "prop upon which meaning leans and with which it is immediately confused" (Caruth 944-5). And indeed, they prop up an entire tradition of linguistic, literary, critical, and metaphysical thought.

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In the chapters which follow, I attempt to "think" the history of language study "linguistically." I invoke Andresen's phrase in all of its dissonance, for what concerns me here is not primarily what the various works I will read say about language or the place which those statements occupy in the history of linguistic thought. Rather, I examine these texts with an eye to the decisions with which we are confronted in reading them and the consequences and implications which these decisions hold for linguistic historiography. In this regard, it is helpful to draw on the distinction Warminski makes between reading and interpretation. Every text we might say is a site of decision because in every text we are confronted with at least two texts. There is, of course, the text which is "there" (albeit, the punctuality of this "there" is compromised by the "already-there" of language). But because that text is possible only to the extent to which it does
not include everything and leaves some things unsaid, there is also the text which is not there. The text-not-there is a sort of phantom double of the former consisting of what Budick and Iser describe as "the implications, omissions, or cancellations that are necessarily part of any writing or speaking" (xii), not least, the already-there of language. Between the "positive" text and its "negative" double, however, there is another textual dimension which, although it forms the material "base of the utterance" (Budick and Iser xii) and thus of its necessary doubleness, remains itself beyond verbalization. More negative than the "no" of logical negation, this negativity is the doubling which makes the text which is there (and thus its latent double) possible.

Although "unsayable and unsaid," this negativity leaves its traces in the text. As we have seen in the case of Andresen, these traces appear in the blanks, caesurae, alibis, and diversions which disrupt the legibility of the text. One can, of course, ignore this static. One typically does and Warminski calls the decipherment which results "interpretation." "Reading," on the other hand examines the space of negativity which renders interpretation possible. In so doing, reading confronts the utterly illegible material "base of utterance" — what has been referred variously to as the texte Brut, the prop, the static, materiality, the trace, reine Spräche, death — which is the text's and interpretation's condition of possibility.

"Interpretation unread" (xiv), explains Gasché; and reading, for its part, is radically de-totalizing. As Gasché explains, Warminski uses the distinction between the two in order to take aim "at fundamental presuppositions of the claim to totality,
presuppositions that are necessary to the possibility of interpretation as such" (xiii). Such presuppositions, moreover, are inscribed in the exegetical patterns and traditions of philosophy. As Gasché observes:

decisions constitutive of interpretation are motivated by the history of philosophical exegesis, by what has become sedimented as the substrate of acquired and binding knowledge. Because philosophical interpretation obeys a canon of sanctioned philosophical problems, because it yields to the tradition that decides what philosophical discourse can achieve, and what it cannot, interpretation does not read what it interprets. It is, according to Warminski, not concerned with the text. Interpretation unread. ("Reading Chiasmus" xiv)

Tradition is inimical to decision; history is the enemy of reading, at least, that is, the sort of history which Nietzsche decried when he condemned philosophers for their "Egypticism." "They think that they show their respect for a subject when they dehistoricize it," he wrote, "when they turn it into a mummy" (479). With her promise of future knowledge, Andresen seems to have history similarly all wrapped up. Her prediction of the distillation of a linguistic essence idealizes and objectifies both language and history in a manner, however, which is consistent with the tradition of linguistic thought in which she works. At the time she wrote "Why do we do linguistic historiography?" Andresen's work focussed largely on the eighteenth century. The framework in which she views her discipline seems derived in an uncritical manner from the rise of comparative method in linguistic thought during that period. Although we will examine the comparative method in greater detail in the chapter on Joseph Priestley, some words are appropriate here.
Renaissance exploration had brought Europeans into contact with a greater number of languages than had ever been imagined to exist. In their variety, these exotic tongues offered a rich field for comparative study and prompted a vigorous search for language universals. Winnowing same from different, linguists sought to reduce all languages back to a single "original, common, universal, and therefore 'natural' language" (Kristeva, *Language* 174). The search for this essential language and the mechanisms common to all tongues gave rise, in turn, to the comparative philology of the nineteenth century and its quest for the laws governing language change.

Despite its universalizing appeal, however, the comparatist model and its presupposition of linguistic essences is clearly an historically specific mode of language study. In invoking the comparatist model in her rationale for linguistic historiography Andresen imports into her practice comparatism's implicit assumption concerning the essential identity of language. Regardless of the context in which it is represented, considered, and discussed, the term "language" refers to a phenomenon with a stable, ontological presence. Differences in its representation are, rather a result of the perspective of those who examine it, their insight into language a function in part of the place they occupy in linguistics' long march towards a more precise understanding of its object.

And yet, in repeating in her interpretation of the texts which comprise the history of the study of linguistic thought the presuppositions of an Enlightenment approach to language, Andresen like other historians of language study necessarily also iterates the
same repressions, elisions, obfuscations, begged questions, blindnesses, and diversions which make the thought of a linguistic essence possible in the target texts and tradition itself. While this practice may create the effect of historical knowledge, the repetition in the historiographical text of the repressions and effacements constitutive of the thought of a linguistic essence in its target texts cannot really be "history." Rather, it consists of a substitution of figurative meanings for the marks which history inscribes in those texts.

No doubt, the suggestion that there might be something "fictional" in their discourse is a thought which would be repugnant to most linguistic historiographers. Similarly, the possibility that their histories might be displaced effects of a tropological defence against the cognitively-obliterating force of some unseen, unheard, unsayable "other" catachrestically dubbed "negativity" is also clearly not on their plates at the moment. But until fairly recently and indeed with an obstinacy which continues to the present, the same could be said of departments of literature where theories of textuality are most securely nested today. Commenting, for example, on the resistance to theory in eighteenth-century literary studies, John Bender has noted

Anglo-American investigation of eighteenth-century literature proceeded largely within deep-rooted postulates -- within a frame of reference -- that fundamentally reproduced Enlightenment assumptions themselves and therefore yielded recapitulation rather than the knowledge produced by critical analysis. (79)

The same could be said for linguistic historiography as it is generally practiced today. With their almost ubiquitous emphasis on "reconstruction" of context and "recovery" of intent as a means of exhausting the meaning of their target texts, linguistic
historiographers repeat -- recapitulate -- the faith in the possibility of discovering and thus knowing essences which is characteristic of much Enlightenment discourse.

And yet, as Derrida has demonstrated, the possibility of "recapitulation" does not imply the existence of an Ur-text or an arch-intention. Repetition, rather, is the mark of the inscription in all speech acts of a space which makes it possible for the same word to appear in contexts other than that of the single moment of its inaugural utterance. In other words, the possibility that linguistic historiography may recapitulate the Enlightenment framework of assumptions concerning language in its reading of linguistic texts is itself only possible because that frame lacks the identity necessary to enclose completely and thus exhaust its subject: that frame, we might say, excludes what renders its representation of the object of study unintelligible. In "recapitulating" the repressions and elisions constitutive of the notion of linguistic essence and thus the postulates of the Enlightenment ethos with which it is cognate, Andresen and others import into their work the traces of the repressed, the elided, and the forgotten non-phenomenal dimension of language which disfigures the target texts of linguistic historiography and makes their interpretation a very tricky, indeed, an inexhaustible task.

It is a task taken up by this thesis. In Part One, I trace the repetition of these repressions and diversions as they figure in two related texts. One, John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) is generally considered a landmark in the history of language study, inaugurating (with the subsequent work of Leibniz, Condillac, and the French *idéologues*) a theory of the sign which informs linguistics to
the present. The second text, Hans Aarsleff's *From Locke to Saussure* is, like his first book *The Study of Language in England 1780-1860*, a roundly-praised, widely-cited work whose broad erudition and trenchant scholarship has made it a formidable bench-mark in the study of the history of linguistic thought. As its title suggests, *From Locke to Saussure* accords Locke's work on language a central, indeed, a grounding position in the tradition of modern linguistic thought. The basis for this tradition, Aarsleff maintains, is Locke's analysis and rejection of the "double conformity" of our ideas, that is, the tendency of speakers to assume a natural and motivated connection between the idea they have of a thing, and the idea they have of the word which stands for that thing. Speakers thus confuse words with the things for which those words stand, assuming the former to be a reliable means of knowing the latter. Locke reminds his readers, however, that words are signs of ideas, not things and with this declaration, Aarsleff says, initiates a tradition of linguistic thought which "can be traced in Condillac, *les idéologues*, Humboldt, Taine, and Saussure" (377 n.9).

But while the basis for this Lockean tradition is a recognition and rejection of the manner in which words and things are commonly confused, neither Locke nor Aarsleff interrogates the conditions which are necessary for such a confusion to occur. Indeed, it is precisely this omission which is the condition of possibility of the coherence of both Locke's theory of language and the tradition Aarsleff describes based on that theory. If words are to be mistaken for things, words and things must share something which serves as the basis for their confusion, some common ground, some similarity in difference,
which allows one to be mistaken for the other. The confusion of words and things, in other words, is possible only if words themselves are already assumed to be things the ideas of which might then be confused with those of other things. The confusion of language with a thing, however, is only possible by way of a more fundamental mistaking of the excess or static of its materiality with the phenomenality of some thing actually present. But it is precisely this primordial confusion which is the condition of possibility of the phenomenal notion of language on which Locke's epistemological theory hinges. Similarly, Aarsleff's notion of "tradition" relies to a large degree on language possessing the sort of stable identity which Locke describes and which ensures that when people write about language they are describing something with a stable, autonomous, empirical presence.

In its agreement with the fundamental assumptions concerning language which are apparent in Locke's text (that is, that language is a thing), Aarsleff's interpretation elides the manner in which that text also exposes in its diversionary rhetoric, the material excess whose effacement is necessary to the coherence of both Locke's theory and Aarsleff's history. In Locke's text, this excess manifests itself in his invocation at the specific instant in which the confusion of word and thing occurs, of deixis, a linguistic mechanism in which the material "taking place" of language is problematically foregrounded in relation to anything which might be "said" in the process.

In assuming that the word "language" refers in Locke's discourse to a stable, phenomenal referent, Aarsleff does not read how the term actually functions there.
Indeed, to read in this manner would be to risk undermining the legibility of his own text. But if, as the philosophers and theorists we have cited maintain, language names not a determinate thing but a process constitutive of the intelligibility of all concepts including language, it is necessary to go back to those texts which discuss language and read them in a manner different from how they have been read to date. If the referent of the word "language" is as indeterminate as they suggest, a more pertinent question to put to these texts concerns not what they say about language or the place what they saying occupies in the history of linguistic thought but rather, how the curious term "language" functions in their discourse and within the culture at large.

In the _Essay_, for example, "language" is a catachresis which functions in a manner which allows Locke to posit understanding as a determinate phenomenon which may be subjected to empirical study. Locke draws the boundaries of understanding by localizing in language the power to distort the real. Language, he argues, fixes the categories by which we know the world, but because it offers us only a taxonomy of the appearances named by the first speakers, these "nominal essences" have at best an uncertain coincidence with the real essences of things.

The theory of nominal essences preserves the possibility of understanding as a determinate phenomenon, centred in the subject, which receives ideas from things existing beyond its limits and powers. For while it suggests that language imposes a particular order upon the real, the notion of nominal essences never implies that language actually posits or constructs the real. Language only diverts that which is already flowing towards
the understanding. Therefore, even though our ideas of the order of things may be quite mistaken, this diversion insures that our grounds for assuming the existence of some essential order "out there" are quite sound as is our sense that understanding is the largely passive receptor of qualities belonging to and supported by reality.

By serving within his argument as that which diverts the effects of something perhaps currently unknowable, but nonetheless positive and given to the understanding, language distinguishes the world of appearances from the world of the real, thereby preserving the positive presence of the real, as well as that of the understanding towards which its "ideas" or "qualities" flow. In other words, in order to represent understanding as a "complete" entity -- positive, self-subsisting, centred in the subject, and distinct from the reality it perceives -- some "other" was necessary for Locke in order to draw the line which separates the two -- that is, in order to serve as that which could explain the confusion of the two -- a confusing element which would thus allow the other two to stand as distinct and self-identical. As that other, language marks the difference between understanding and the real by serving as that which diverts the understanding in its perception of the real. Without this diverting entity, understanding's difference from the world would be uncertain. But by functioning as that which leads the understanding astray in its perception of the real, language marks the limits of understanding and thus preserves the integrity of understanding as a determinate phenomenon which might be known through observation.
From the example of Locke's *Essay* it is apparent that the term "language" may function in the texts of which it is the putative subject as a sort of "syntactical plug" which, in effacing the radical materiality which renders representation always inadequate to the real, allows concepts, theories, and arguments to deploy their effects of coherence and totalization. But, in catachrestically filling a fundamental lack inscribed in all concepts, "language" is also a site of contest among ideological forces struggling not so much to describe some "objective fact" which corresponds to the term language, but rather to efface the excess which forbids them from ever completing such a task. In Part Two I examine from this perspective the overdetermined manner in which language functions in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and the *Plan of a Dictionary* (1747). If Locke invokes language so as to preserve the identity and phenomenality of the understanding and the world, thus ensuring the possibility of his own empirical project, language functions in Johnson's *Dictionary* in a manner which is bound up with his effort to establish lexicography as an activity socially recognized as productive of value, that is, as that which Marx called "labour." In the course of determining the meanings of the words included in its pages, the *Dictionary* also seeks to define the activities which do and do not constitute labour. Not surprisingly, lexicography is foremost among those activities which the *Dictionary* valorizes. In proclaiming the importance of a stable language to the health of a nation while calling attention to the "industry" involved in the production of the *Dictionary*, Johnson presents lexicography as an endeavour whose status as a value-producing activity is beyond
question. Such a self-legitimizing gesture, in turn, provides the Dictionary with the authority to pick and choose among the discourses it surveys, determining on the basis of the apparent "durability" of the words which characterize each of them, and thus the types of labour with which those discourses are associated, which are of value and which expendable. For example, deemed "casual and mutable," the terms of the "laborious and mercantile part of the people" are omitted from the Dictionary and "suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation." Such self-vorization, however, is not without its complications, for in Johnson's text the determination of the lexicographer's labour is necessarily bound up with the possibility of fixing meaning. If lexicography is to be determined as a specific type of activity, productive of a particular sort of commodity (a commodity which thus far in English letters had lacked such specificity) and thus recognized as labour, it must be able to fix its own character in its product, that is, in the dictionary itself. In accordance with prevailing eighteenth-century atomistic notions of language, however, such a possibility presupposes that the "material" with which the lexicographer works -- language -- possesses a substance which would allow such a determination to take place. In short, Johnson's valorization of lexicography as labour and his declaration that the "one great end" of his Dictionary "is to fix the English language" are reciprocally imbricated elements of the text. He can only fix one by fixing the other and thus must create and sustain the effect of language as an "objective fact." In its inability to establish the substance of language, the Dictionary adumbrates a radically indeterminate boundary common to both language and labour. Johnson's
attempt to "fix" language signals a desire to palliate the disruptive linguistic and social force which inheres in the very indeterminateness which that boundary marks.

As catachresis, language marks a space subject to ideological motivations. But, as Foucault has demonstrated, a discursive field is neither a totality nor unified: it is, in fact, marked by fragmentation and indeterminateness. As such, it is always a dynamic space in which struggle, conflict, and resistance may occur. In Part Three, I examine a number of texts on language by the English reformer Joseph Priestley and the radical John Horne Tooke which confront, challenge, and resist the hegemonic representation of language in Locke and Johnson.

Although his approach to language is every bit as empirical as that of Locke and Johnson, Joseph Priestley's main works on language (The Rudiments of English Grammar [1761], A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar [1762], A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism [1777]) resist empiricism's normative pressure by representing the actual event of utterance as a site of political consequence. Combining a millennialist view of history with a republican zeal for liberty, Priestley displaces the Adamic dream of the coherence of signifier and signified which Locke rejected, from the beginning of history to its end, predicting that a universal, philosophical language and the truth it will embody will one day arise provided that people are free to propound and explore a plurality of views on all subjects. From the millennial perspective it will become clear, he predicts, that words and things are connected. That connection, however, is determined by the role which each utterance
plays in hastening or stalling the progress of human knowledge and political institutions towards their final perfection: only then will that connection be recognized. A word's meaning, in other words, is ultimately determined by its perlocutionary effect: the meaningfulness of a word is a function of the historical role it plays as a means to the millennial end.

In presenting language as a process of becoming meaningful, and in dislocating meaning from a strictly intentional definition towards one which acknowledges the performative aspects of language, Priestley's texts open a space in language and history in which conceptual identities have yet to be determined. But, irreducible to intentionality or interpretability, the performative dimension which offers a space of resistance in language, also marks an excess of "marking" over "meaning" which would prohibit the sort of final conjunction of word and thing which Priestley predicts. Language performs, says Priestley, but as long as language is at bottom an act, the ends and means of its knowledge will never coincide.

While stressing language as an act, Priestley's theory resists reducing language to a mere carrier of meaning: his utterly calculated view of history and eschatological theory of meaning ultimately casts language as a thing -- a historical thing perhaps, but a thing nonetheless, one thing in a world of things. Priestley's theory is at bottom not that far removed from Locke's own. Indeed, in the final chapter of the Essay, Locke too looks to the future, proposing a tripartite division of knowledge into epistemology, ethics,
and semiotics, the last of which he predicts might "afford us another sort of logic and critic, than what we have been hitherto acquainted with" (IV,xxi,4).

A more profound challenge to the normative authority of empirical theories of language, however, is to be found in Tooke's exotic Diversions of Purley (Vol. I, 1786; Vol. II, 1805). Tooke's work resists determinate conceptions of either history or language such as we find in Locke, Johnson, and Priestley, displacing the models of identity, continuity, and coherence on which such conceptions depend with those of contiguity and difference. Despite its own claims to "truth," Tooke's text implicitly demonstrates the differential nature of history and language, and thus the material dimension common to both -- common, but precisely as their difference -- which is suppressed by any truth claim which posits history or language as an autonomous, self-sufficient object of knowledge.

Tooke states that he devises his "system" of linguistic change and signification as a protection against the same "confusion and imposition of words" which worried Locke. The sometimes absurd etymological proofs with which he supports his system, however, draw on the very sort of contingent signification which creates an effect of meaning while disguising the absence of such against which his system was apparently devised as a buffer. In this way, Tooke creates an ironic effect of "truth" with which he may challenge the conservative ideas of the intellectual elite of his day, while, more subversively still, demonstrating the absence which such "truths" conceal.
Tooke's *Diversions* adumbrates a space common to both "language" and "history" but proper to neither in which it is possible to trace the movements of the reciprocally constitutive relationship which obtains between the concepts. This space is necessary to the identity of both but only insofar as it is the condition of possibility of the chiasmic detouring of the one through the other which is apparent in the rhetoric of Tooke's text. With the effects of identity which it generates, this diversion also, with the same gesture, effaces the lack which that detour marks. The diversionary relationship of the one through the other is thus also that which diverts attention from the process of saying "language" or "history" to that which is *said*.

And yet, in evoking such a reciprocally informing relationship in his text, Tooke draws attention to the diversions which underlie all such apparently self-identical notions of history or language and thus the lack which those terms mark. This space, however, is precisely that which, in the texts which comprise its various traditions, linguistic historiography will not confront. To interrogate that space is to expose a "material" dimension of language and of history which no amount of contextual reconstruction may recover or exhaust for it is the effaced dimension upon which such concepts "lean" and thus derive the phenomenality on which the historiographical texts rely for their coherence.

Linguistic historiography often equates what Aarsleff calls "the task of gaining the proper depth of historical perspective within a given period" with the act of "recaptur[ing] all relevant contemporary knowledge without reference to or misguidance by the later
accumulation of scholarly opinion and assignment of influences, which are far too often and too easily accorded the status of unquestioned doctrine" (Study 10). No less unquestioned, however, is an interpretative process whose decisions are made for it in advance by a metaphysical and historiographical tradition which assumes the integrity and thus the recoverability of an *Ur-text*. Such a tradition, moreover, is one in which a phenomenal theory of language plays no small part. While Aarsleff and others may decry the reading of the historical text through the "doctrine" of the present, their own historiographical practice is decided to a large degree by the tradition embodied in the texts which comprise its subject matter. Indeed, on the opening page of *From Locke to Saussure* Aarsleff declares that "agreeing with Condillac and Saussure that language is the first human and social institution, I wish to restore the study of language to its rightful place in intellectual history" (3). In declaring language the original "human and social institution," however, Aarsleff evokes the Enlightenment debate concerning which came first, language or society, and with it the assurance that the two, although related, are nonetheless autonomous, determinate phenomena. The question of which came first, however, is possible only because there is a dimension of language which, in exceeding and preceding any such punctual notion as that of "firsts," makes all origins into fictions retrospectively imposed. The problem of the precedence of language in relation to society is demonstrated in the aporias which are apparent in the notion of the social contract. Paraphrasing Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington explains how, in order for society's inaugural document to be signed, presupposes not only "the 'yes' that precedes every
supposedly inaugural performance" (231), but also the existence of at least one of the
parties whose identity apparently arises only with the signing of the contract:

the primitive "contract" marked by the "yes" said to the other, the
contracting ring of indebtedness which closes thus in its more or less tight
striction, precedes any social contract as its condition of possibility (how
do you say yes to the social contract, or sign it, if the contractors are not
already bound by a code permitting a minimum of mutual comprehension),
and therefore, as we expect by now, as its condition of impossibility (for
how will the social contract ever attain the originary it is seeking if it
must presupposed a priori an earlier contract?). We also know that the
idea of a social contract must give to time a twist it is unable to think,
insofar as at least one of the parties to the contract has its existence only
through the contract it is nevertheless supposed to be able to sign, and
therefore is supposed to precede. (232-3)

No less problematic than the originary of language is Aarsleff’s conception of language
as the "first human institution." Again paraphrasing Derrida, Bennington notes

we receive language like the law, which fact casts doubt on the very
coherence of the question about the origin of language, and reminds us
among other things that language is not essentially human (for if language
is always received, the "first man" must have received it from some
nonhuman agency, which does not mean that he received it from God or
a god, although "God" is perhaps the name, or one of the names of this
very situation). (232)

In its "refusal to think of language as in some way a separate domain over against the
world" (232), this passage shadows forth that unnamable dimension which most troubles
the study of language, whether by philosophers, literary theorists, linguists, or linguistic
historiographers. In their invocation of "origins" and "essences" we witness a desire to
palliate the unthinkable consequences which that excess marks for all determinate
conceptions of history or language.
In seeking out the sites in which the imbricated materiality of language and history marks and disrupts the sense of the texts of Locke, Johnson, Priestley, and Tooke, I make no claim to recover the essence of what Gasché calls "an unadulterated and uncontaminated Ur-text" ("Reading Chiasmus" xiv). Rather, I am reading for the traces of the excess which linguistic historiographers must efface in order for them to posit and maintain the determinate, phenomenal notion of language on which hinges the possibility and thus the coherence of the histories they relate. As a lack, those traces mark precisely that which forbids any text from possessing an identity or essence which one might be able to recover through a process of exegesis. By the same token, however, in reading for those incommensurable elements in the text, I also seek to expose a space in (or more precisely, of) language which allows that concept to function in those texts as a sort of alibi for various ideological motivations, whether they be those which seek to naturalize language in order to assert or maintain the interests of a particular class, or those which radicalize it as a means of resisting such imposture.
PART ONE

Chapter One

The History of What Language is Not:

Linguistic Historiography and Non-Phenomenal Linguistics

... history is not fiction.

-- Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity"

Introduction

When brought to bear upon linguistic events, temporal concepts such as history acquire, as Paul de Man observes in a statement surely bordering on the meiotic, a complexity which is "particularly rich" (LHLM 144). That this richness, in fact, marks a radical exorbitance which disrupts the coherence of any determinate notions of history or language we might hold, is a possibility which linguistic historiography in its prevailing mode, both represses but, because repression is a kind of remembering, also divulges in the caesurae and elisions inscribed in its texts. In this chapter and the next I would like to begin my consideration of a non-phenomenal approach to such a "richly complex" field as linguistic historiography by examining the manner in which language and history are articulated in two important texts, both pertinent to the field. One, John

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Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is frequently cited as a landmark text in the history of linguistic thought. The other, Hans Aarsleff's *From Locke to Saussure*, has held a prominent place in linguistic historiography for almost two decades. As I shall argue, in approaching his subject from the perspective of what I have called a phenomenal linguistics, Aarsleff describes a tradition of linguistic thought inaugurated by Locke which extends into our own century. Aarleff's notion of tradition, however, and the coherence of history it implies, is unsettled in a profound way by a blank, exorbitant dimension of language which a non-phenomenal reading of Locke's text exposes. Aarsleff's work is by no means "wrong." He treats his subject with great acuity and, as such, his authority in the field is unparalleled. By the same token, however, his historiographical project is only "possible" on the basis of an elision of that dimension of Locke's text which threatens the intelligibility of both language and history as self-consistent, determinate concepts.

1. Linguistic Historiography and the Cheat of Language

Interest in linguistic historiography was sparked in the mid-1960s by three distinct but almost simultaneous scholarly jolts. 1966 saw the publication in the United States of Noam Chomsky's *Cartesian Linguistics*. Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* was released in France the same year. These landmark texts were followed in 1967 by the less spectacular, but no less momentous appearance of *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* by the Princeton professor of English, Hans Aarsleff. Although
vastly different in aim, method, and impact, these three works gave new life to a corpus of texts previously considered of only marginal significance to those disciplines which until then had acknowledged their existence at all. Chomsky, for example, ignited fresh curiosity in the seventeenth-century Port-Royal Grammar of Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot. Foucault, in his study of the conditions of possibility of knowledge from the Renaissance to the present, addressed a mosaic of linguistic works, including several often overlooked in the oeuvre of such canonized thinkers as Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. And Aarsleff, for his part, exhumed the all-but-forgotten etymological study of language, Epea Pteroenta, or the Diversions of Purley by the eighteenth-century English radical John Horne Tooke.

Of the three, it is Aarsleff whose work today seems perhaps most "traditional." For this reason, and because of his prominence in the field, I would like to rehearse a general outline of some of his ideas, both those concerning linguistic historiography and the notion of "tradition" as it emerges in his work. Aarsleff argues that the "main tradition" in Western linguistic thought "from Locke to Saussure" is based on a rejection by those writing on language of the tendency of speakers to "believe that words are as good as things" (LS 24). As I will argue, however, this so-called "cheat of words" is cognate with a more primordial confusion (which we might call the "cheat of language") in which language itself is assumed to possess the identity and presence of an object. Both Locke and Aarsleff elide such a possibility. This confusion, however, not of words and things, but of words and language for a thing, I will argue, is the condition of
possibility of the description of a coherent tradition of linguistic thought such as that which Aarsleff posits, even, paradoxically, when that tradition is based on the rejection of the confusion of words and things.

Aarsleff identifies his work with the practices of the discipline of the history of ideas or intellectual history as it is now called. Employing this approach, he seeks to understand developments in linguistic thought by way of an examination of the broader intellectual, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they occur, rather than from the enlightened perspective of a present state of knowledge which regards itself as the telos of the record of progress which it sets down. Although, as Aarsleff notes in his Preface to the 1983 edition of *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, the method he employed there "has since largely come to be taken for granted in the history of language study" (vii), such was not always the case. By his own account, his approach was in fact a response to the overwhelmingly positivistic mode of historiography which prevailed in language study when he began his research in the late 1950s. Embodied in the few, mostly German, studies of the subject, this approach countenanced only those theories and works (or portions thereof) which could be shown to point, one after another, to the linguistic truths contemporary with the time in which those histories were being written and which described a path which lead inexorably to the door of that academic discipline or institution which housed those who related such accounts. As Aarsleff notes in *From Locke to Saussure*, the standard history of linguistic thought "is the internal history of an institutionalized professorial craft" (7). These were histories which processed the past
through a present which the historians unabashedly regarded as the summit of linguistic truth. In doing so, however, such works left no room for a consideration of the frequent monstrous births of linguistic thought and the occasionally great influence which such prodigies were capable of exerting in their time and after. (The main example which Aarsleff seizes upon is Tooke's eccentric Divisions of Purley which I will look at in Chapter Seven).

To accommodate error, to seek to understand its place in the development of a field of knowledge, is to consider a subject in terms of the matters with which it was associated at a particular time, even if those matters seem extraneous to our notions of that subject as it is understood today. Thus, Aarsleff notes that language study during the period on which he focuses

was not merely a matter of knowing the forms, syntax, phonology, historical relationships, and other aspects of particular languages. It involved questions of wider significance. What, for instance, was the origin of thought? Did the mind have a material basis? Did mankind have a single origin? Was the first language given by revelation or had man invented it in the process of time? Could etymology be made instructive without lending support to skepticism? (4)

There are at least two ways of looking at this blurring of the object of linguistic study into other areas such as epistemology and theology. One could say with Aarsleff that, "the study of language in any period is intertwined with events in the larger cultural context [in which that study occurs], such as developments in natural science, in philosophy, and even in political and religious thought" (vii). This is undoubtedly so for no intellectual activity can operate out of its context. What such an argument leaves
unanswered, however, (or perhaps, more accurately, unquestioned), is the possibility that such a diffusion of the object of study and its imbrication with other areas of knowledge, also indicates a radical instability in that object. That instability, whose nature and effects are the object of study in this dissertation, shadows forth the possibility that language may lack the identity necessary for its various descriptions over time to be ordered into a coherent history. Linguistic historiography, in other words, may narrate the history of what language is not. If anything general might be said about the texts which comprise such a history, it may well be this: that each in its own way enacts a historical, which is to say an ideological, effort not so much to describe some "objective fact" which corresponds to the term "language," but rather to efface an excess which that term exposes and which like an ever-retreating horizon, ultimately eludes representation.

In considering such possibilities, it is important to note that the coherence provided by the broader, contextual perspective Aarsleff demands is not merely synchronic. It is diachronic as well. Aarsleff, after all, is writing history and it is only through a broad understanding of the diversity of questions involved with and constitutive of a subject at a given time that it is possible to establish a history which is comprehensive and coherent -- key words in Aarsleff's methodological vocabulary -- and not a mere "record of the chronological sequence of events that qualified for selection to create the vision of nearly unobstructed progress, though a sort of irrelevant progress except to the scholars and the institutions they served" (vi). Aarsleff's work is directed against those positivistic histories which produce "retrospectively constructed myths of
reputable ancestry" (viii) for their discipline, creating through incantations of what he calls the "prestigious appellations of 'science' and 'scientific'" the impression that "the top has been reached" (9).³

Although he rejects histories of language study which draw an unbroken line from past to present, Aarsleff does not suggest that there are no patterns and traditions among the works he describes. For Aarsleff, such patterns and the continuity they suggest are in fact the signs that a history possesses the coherence necessary to raise it above the level of mere annalistic accounts of a progress "irrelevant . . . except to the scholars and institutions they served" (vi). Furthermore, a broadly-based, contextually-sensitive approach such as Aarsleff's would, it seems, reveal pathways, diversions, conflicts, and traditions in linguistic thought which positivistic histories would overlook. And this is indeed the case. In the introduction to a 1982 collection of essays, Aarsleff claims to have uncovered "the main tradition" (19) of language study over the last three hundred years, a genealogy whose unerring trajectory is expressed in the collection's very title, From Locke to Saussure. According to Aarsleff, Locke inaugurated this tradition with his rejection in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding of the Adamic doctrine of language. Believed to be divinely created, the language of Adam described in Genesis was thought by philosophers and theologians in Locke's time to have had the capacity to express the essence of things in their names.⁴ Furthermore, it was often argued that a certain residual correspondence between words and things remained in language even after the Flood and the confusion at Babel. Thus it was believed that, at some
etymological level, a divine guarantee promised that the words people used corresponded in some essential manner to those things about which they spoke or wrote and that, through the appropriate etymological labour, it would be possible to discover something of the nature of things through words alone.

Against the Adamic doctrine, Locke contended that, although God granted the first people the ability to form meaningful, articulate sounds, language itself was not created by God with Adam: it was the product of convention and, as such, the relationship between names and things was and remains, completely arbitrary. Aarsleff's Locke thus severed whatever roots it had once been imagined that words had in those things which they represented. Language was wholly human -- indeed, the being-human of humanity rests with language. By the same token, however, Locke's declaration of the human provenance of language rendered highly doubtful any notion that words bore a divinely-sanctioned correspondence to things.5

Locke's rejection of the Adamic doctrine was coextensive with his analysis and refutation of what he called "double conformity." As a matter of habit, speakers typically take the words they use as reliable signs or substitutes for the things those words represent, "as if," Locke writes, "the Name carried with it the Knowledge of the Species, or the essence of it" (II, xxxii, 7). But words, Locke argues, are signs of ideas, not things and any identity which speakers might take to exist between them is not the result of a natural connection but rather of the speaker's automatic assumption of the reliability of the "double conformity" of the thing-idea and idea-word relationships constitutive of
linguistic meaning. Locke detected something ominous in the word-thing habit, particularly in what Aarsleff describes as its "most serious embodiment in the Adamic language doctrine" (26): the Adamic doctrine elevated what is little more than a practical convenience of day-to-day life into an epistemology which saw in language "a safe and simple nomenclature to the inventory of the world" (LS 24). Aarsleff identifies Locke's rejection of the Adamic doctrine and its monumentalization of "double conformity" as the theme which inaugurated a "philosophy of signs," and which binds together a tradition of linguistic thought which, he argues, "can be traced in Condillac, les idéologues, Humboldt, Taine, and Saussure" (377 n. 9). One has only to consider the opening words of Saussure's Course in General Linguistics to find support for this thesis. There, Saussure argues that a nomenclatural view of language "leads one to assume that the link between a name and a thing is something quite unproblematic, which is far from being the case. Nonetheless, this naive view contains one element of truth, which is that linguistic units are dual in nature, comprising two elements" (66). Rejection of the word-thing habit or the "cheat of words" is thus the theme which allows Aarsleff to posit the existence of a coherent tradition in language study over the last three hundred years. And yet, there is another cheat to be discerned in this confusion, different from the cheat of words perhaps, but also related to it, a cheat of which the coherence of this history -- as perhaps of all historical narrative -- is an effect. That is, what I have called the "cheat of language."
2. Reading the Unknown

The tradition of language study which Aarsleff describes as seminal is based on the theme of the common resistance among those who write on language to the confusion between words and things which typically occurs in the minds of language users. The coherence of this tradition, however, may itself be an effect of a more profound confusion, enacted by historians of language study such as Aarsleff: where speakers tend to confuse words with things, Aarsleff takes language "itself" as a thing, confounding (as I will demonstrate) the materiality of language with its phenomenality.

Put succinctly, for this is a complex point which requires considerable exploration and demonstration, and so is one to which I will return frequently in this dissertation, the coherence of Aarsleff's history is grounded on an assumption that the word "language" designates a determinate phenomenon which all theorists of language will, by definition, describe. (As Saussure, states it, somewhat tautologically perhaps but in keeping with the synchronic emphasis of the Course, "The only true object of study in linguistics is the language, considered in itself and for its own sake" [9].) Although differences in the intellectual, cultural, social, and institutional context of anyone who writes about language will result in that object of study being revealed from different perspectives and in varying degrees of shadow and light, the fact remains that such histories assume that, when one says "language," he or she refers to a phenomenon ontologically stable and discrete and thus open to empirical description. Aarsleff reiterates the thought of such a phenomenon in his insistence that, although various writers on language call or have
called what they do by various names such as philology, philosophy of language, or linguistics, "the study of language is unitary" (LS 4) and, as such, must include, "any reasonably coherent and clearly formulated discussion that is specifically directed toward problems that arise in relation to language" (Study 6). Such a definition of the materials of the history of linguistic thought presupposes an object of study of such coherence and determinateness that two theorists, separated by three centuries, can be said to be discussing the same phenomenon when they write about something called "language," this, notwithstanding the fact that comparably important notions like the "subject," the "criminal," and the "mad," are no longer viewed as stable over time. Is it possible to verify the presence of a determinate object to which the word "language" refers?

A working assumption behind this dissertation is that, because the nature of the proper object of "language study" is a perennial difficulty in linguistics, it should be no less so for the discipline which seeks to describe the history of that study, even where the possible indeterminateness of the object of study threatens the unity or coherence of such histories. Consistently, however, linguistic historiographers have ignored the heterogeneity -- indeed, as I shall suggest, the incoherence -- of that whose study is the subject of the history they seek to tell. As a result, the coherence and comprehensiveness of these histories, regardless of how broadly framed they might be or how widely they have cast their net of contextual analysis, is based on readings which fail to consider the manner in which the rhetoric of these texts frequently tells a story other than that which is described at a thematic level, a story of conflict, pathos, and ultimately the failure of
language to account adequately for its own operations, to see behind its own back, as it were, and back over the threshold it has crossed, into the doorway through which it has passed in coming into being, along with the other phenomena which necessarily emerge with it in this passage. Throughout this thesis, I seek to tease out from a number of texts from the "canon" of linguistic history those sites where a dimension of language irreducible to notions of interpretability and meaning leaves traces disruptive to both a phenomenal notion of language and to any history which might seek to offer a coherent narrative of its study. In eliding the complex relationship between the telling and told of language (as well as the bearing which this question has on our conception of the notion of history), linguistic historiography as it is practiced today deals only obliquely with the "linguistic," shielding itself from the more unsettling implications of the texts it examines in order to provide a unified history. Rather than offering the history of the study of a phenomenon with a positive identity, linguistic historiography presents us with a record of the effects of the obliteration of the radical incoherence which is exposed whenever one seeks to account exhaustively for language. Not a presence, not a phenomenon, but rather the space of an unrepresentable opening and excess, this incoherence marks the necessary, always unique, and randomly-occurring movement in which language, along with the other concepts with which it is imbricated -- mind, community, class, labour, death, all of which will be evoked in this thesis -- come into being. As a rupture, it constitutes an alternate dimension of history as it is rendered by linguistic historiographers, a radically heterogeneous and unscriptable moment, continuous
with nothing which precedes or follows it, a moment, moreover, which must be effaced if such a history is to emerge. To trace this moment, to map its aftermath, I will need to turn to de Man’s forbiddingly difficult later work. For now, let me suggest that a coherent history of the study of language is possible only on the basis of a repetition of the inaugural movement in which this eruptive dimension of language is effaced. After de Man, we might say that the history of the study of language in its prevailing mode is possible only insofar as it sees language as what language is not.\textsuperscript{8}

Nowhere does a consideration of the difficulties associated with this "other" history of language study break the surface of Aarsleff’s utterly coherent narrative. In fashioning the historiography of language study after that of the methods and practices of the historians of science, Aarsleff and those who have followed his example repeat the tendency of linguistics to think of itself as a scientific discipline and of language as an "objective fact."\textsuperscript{9} But is language simply one object of knowledge among others? And if it is not, how is it different? How should it be studied? And how should we read the texts which comprise the emerging canon of the history of linguistic thought?

In fact, it is precisely in the reading of such texts that these questions gain prominence, provided, of course, that we read them closely, attentive to the rhetoric they deploy in their representation of language. The moments in which the notion of a coherent phenomenon called "language" tends to be subjected to the greatest rhetorical pressure are those when metalinguistic texts seek to define the proper object of their
study.\textsuperscript{10} For example, the nature of this object is the first theoretical question which Saussure considers in the \textit{Cours de linguistique générale}. Saussure asks:

What is it that linguistics sets out to analyse? What is the actual object of study in its entirety? The question is a particularly difficult one. Other sciences are provided with objects of study in advance which are then examined from different points of view. Nothing like that is the case in linguistics. . . . The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object. Furthermore, there is nothing to tell us in advance whether one of these ways of looking at it is prior or superior to any of the others. (8)

As Tony Crowley has pointed out, questions of the relationship between "viewpoint" and the object of scientific study are not unique to linguistics (27).\textsuperscript{11} What is unique, however, is the relationship between the object of linguistic study and its representation: clearly, in no other science is the object of study called upon to represent itself. To understand the implications of this fact, we must turn to the work of deconstruction.

As deconstructive critics have demonstrated, the non-semantic dimension of language operates in a manner which is utterly indifferent to the statements which those mechanisms produce. Exploring the space exposed by the incommensurability of "meaning' with the devices that produce 'meaning'" (de Man, \textit{RH} 66), deconstructive readings confront an opening cognate with but not reducible to any empirical notion of language with which we might be familiar. As Julia Kristeva notes, language "is and will always remain more unknown than man, and coextensive with his being" (vii). No one, therefore, will confront the blank limit language marks or experience the excess for which it cannot account, as acutely or as disconcertingly as he or she who writes explicitly about
language. It is for this reason that this dissertation has as its primary focus the following principle: the texts which one might include in the canon of the history of linguistic thought are of interest for reasons quite other than those of helping us to understand the development of linguistic science or of illuminating the history of those areas of study with which it has, at various times and in various configurations, overlapped, important as such endeavours may be. In the resistance these texts pose to their definitions and descriptions of their "proper object of study," (as indeed in the peculiar manner in which these patterns of resistance recur in different ways in different texts), language emerges not as a discrete object of knowledge but as an indeterminate space in knowledge, a space, moreover, which is necessarily, but only provisionally, effaced by the figural movement of description, of which the catachrestic naming of that space as "language" is the first gesture. "Language," we might say, emerges as a determinate object of study in such texts only by way of an obliteration of that indeterminate dimension which we may only uncertainly attribute to the phenomenon we call language. Seen from the category of what Tilottama Rajan (writing about Kristeva) calls "a process or materiality anterior to the signifier" (TPD 215), it is possible to describe the study of language as the effacement of the conditions which would render an exhaustive, determinate description of language impossible. Finally, in its radical indeterminateness the "space of language" is also a site of contest: because it overlaps with but is not identical to the determinateness of all other concepts besides language including history, the effacement of that space in linguistic texts is an act with an ideological dimension. The struggle
which takes place in and over the space of language is necessarily that of those who, consciously or not, would name that space and thus efface its unspeakable lack or excess in a manner consistent with their own interests -- either perceived or unconscious -- and thus render its blankness after their own image.

3. The Space of Language

Language alone reveals the moment of its own interruption.

-- Maurice Blanchot

To step beyond the familiar bounds of phenomenal notions of language is to enter the twilit space of a play of relations in which there are no stable points of reference. In order to approach the unthinkable exorbitance this space marks, a space which forbids language from ever closing the book on itself and which leaves all systems of linguistic thought radically open, it is necessary to devote some pages to a careful articulation of what a non-phenomenal study of language might look like. What, for example, are we to make of the indeterminateness, that is, the undecidability, which the space of language marks?

Deconstruction is frequently condemned for helplessly throwing up its hands before the undecidability it exposes in concepts which might otherwise, it is argued, have provided the grounds for positive, political action. Such charges tell only half the story, however, for the undecidability which deconstruction describes is just one side (the far side) of the condition of possibility of decision itself. In confronting the indeterminate
dimension of such apparently positive phenomena as language and history, deconstruction exposes such concepts as sites of decision -- which is to say, as political sites. To write is to face and efface (although the effacement is always provisional) the fundamentally indeterminate space of language and the incomprehensibility with which it opposes us. To write, in other words, is to decide. (The same could be said for reading). In metalinguistic discourse, for example (and perhaps more apparently there than in other sorts of writing), the decision to write necessarily involves a resolution to confront and efface the unintelligible blankness of a dimension of language of which the writer may or may not be conscious, but which he or she will nonetheless experience in varying degrees of dread, fear, and pathos, traces of which will be registered in the text. To fail to make such a decision would be to be reduced literally to the state of quietism with which deconstruction is frequently identified and for which it is condemned. Too often deconstruction's careful interrogation of the conditions of possibility of decision are taken by critics as a sign of deconstruction's own stammering indecisiveness and thus its political ineffectuality.13

But having confronted the space of what Derrida calls an "ineluctable undecidability" (FL 1012), the decision not to write, the decision to accept silence and refuse to act upon the imperative to decide which the radical in-decision prior to all decisions forces upon us, is itself, when considered in the broader context of linguistic inquiry, an eloquent token of a non-phenomenal dimension of language. Undecidability, says Derrida, "opens, first, upon another dimension of language, on an au-delà beyond
mediation and so beyond language as sign in the sense of mediation, as a means with an end in view" (1021). It is precisely this dimension which commentators have found adumbrated in Saussure's abandoned research into anagrams. It was Saussure's hypothesis that Latin poetry was structured according to patterns formed by the phonemes and letters of an anagrammatically disseminated theme-word or proper name. These patterns, he believed, also functioned in the poetry as a secondary sign system. For example, in the invocation to Venus which opens Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, Saussure discovered three anagrams of the name of the Roman goddess's Greek counterpart, Aphrodite (Starobinski 57). At the very least, such a "discovery" was significant for its suggestion that meaning could be generated through the elaboration of a code or formula comprised of non-semantic elements such as letters and phonemes rather than by way of a process which was strictly referential and representational. But the implications of Saussure's research went far beyond any stir which might have been created by a recognition of the suspension of reference in poetic language. Saussure was seeking the law which would explain the distribution of names into the anagrammatic patterns he discovered. What he could not determine, however, was whether the patterns, which seemed to proliferate the more he searched for them, were the product of such a rule or were merely the result of a random distribution of phonemes. Faced with this undecidable dilemma, Saussure finally abandoned his research, leaving no published record of the impasse he had reached although, as de Man notes, retheorizing and thus
palliating the disruptive force of this other-than-rational dimension of language by adopting the "scientific" approach to language we find in the Cours (HI 37).

In the essay "Hypogram and Inscription," de Man considers Saussure's predicament in terms of the violently disruptive implications it holds for the humanistic reduction of language to the representation of meanings present in the mind of the speaker. Saussure's problem was this: unable to determine if the anagrammatic patterns he discovered were the product of chance or design, he could not say with any certainty what was and was not "properly" a sign, at least a sign understood as a signifier motivated by a poet's intention to mean: meaning, it suddenly seemed, could be an effect of "factors or functions that cannot be reduced to intuition" (RT 13). What Marc Redfield has called the "impossible possibility that a sign may not be a sign" (44) (at least, that is, a sign understood as the vehicle of intention), implies that one can never be absolutely assured that the processes of signification, and with them, their signs, are "given" as such to perception: the undecidable meaningfulness of those "signs" defies the continuity we necessarily assume to obtain between the sensory element of language and meaning, rendering the relation between the two as one of relative independence. The chasm which thus opens in language disrupts not just the assumption of the intelligibility of signs -- that is, the belief that we experience signs as phenomena available to the senses -- but also the possibility of phenomenal cognition itself. The concept of cognition implies the existence of a world of phenomena "out there" and available, by way of perception, to understanding. Among these phenomena is language. The notion of what
de Man calls the "phenomenality of language" \textit{(HI 34)} is coextensive with a paradigm of language as "representational or expressive of a referential, proper meaning" \textit{(AR 106)}. In this model, prevalent in the field of linguistic historiography as elsewhere, the referential function of language serves "as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition" \textit{(RT 11)}, that is, as a figure of understanding. It is the authority, indeed the hegemony, of this figure and the strictly phenomenal notion of language which it maintains which de Man interrogates in his later essays. As Jonathan Culler explains, a phenomenal conception of language denotes that "there is given to perception a body of sensible signifiers which stand in a representational relation to conceptual signifieds that are given to the understanding" \textit{("Reading Lyric" 104)}. If, however, as Saussure's work on anagrams suggests, phenomenality is not the result of a continuity between percept and concept, but rather of an arbitrary imposition of form upon the mute, unintelligible, heterogeneous, prephenomenal condition of signification exemplified in the indeterminate blur of signs/not signs that Saussure confronts and which de Man idiosyncratically calls linguistic "materiality," then cognition may be an effect of language rather than its master.

The "materiality" of language is one of a complex of overlapping terms which de Man employs to delineate the conditions and processes which set the cognitive or semantic function of language in motion, that is, the mechanisms which create the effect that certain marks and noises are meaningful while others are not. Linguistic materiality should not be understood as the same as the determinate materiality we ascribe to the
world of phenomena. Rather, it is the prephenomenal excess which would remain if we could separate signs from their meanings, a possibility, it needs to be emphasized, which the notion of the sign both implies and denies. As Cynthia Chase explains:

The concept of the sign entails the concept of a trace or space produced arbitrarily: by chance (or by an intention always established only after the fact), not by necessity (not arising by nature as a necessary part of the physical world). The arbitrary relation between the meaning and the sensory component of the sign implies a moment in which the sign stands free of its significations. On the other hand, de Man stresses that this moment can never exist as such. The sign exists only insofar as it signifies, enters into a determinable relationship or system of relationships. (96)

As the position which allows a sign to be distinguished from its signification, this arbitrary space is the incoherent and "nondeterminably significative" (Chase 105) opening which makes language possible. It is opened by a violent "positional act which relates to nothing that comes before or after" (SD 117) which de Man calls "inscription." "Neither a figure, nor a sign, nor a cognition, nor a desire, ... nor a matrix" (HI 51), inscription opens the space of difference which is necessary for language to emerge from its tomb of self-sameness and thus confront us as a determinate phenomenon or presence. Inscription allows language to take place.

To gain a better understanding of de Man's notion of inscription, it is helpful to turn to the partly cognate work of Jacques Derrida, particularly his description of the operation of the "trace." Derrida has demonstrated that self-difference is the condition of possibility for the emergence of any apparently self-identical concept such as "language." As a node in the interweavings of an open-ended economy of differential
relations in which presence (i.e., absolute self-identity) can never be present as such, but is persistently deferred, identity is an effect of difference, and not merely of the "simple" difference of the non-identity of two self-identical elements: to limit difference in that way is to ascribe a kernel of non-relational positivity to certain elements in a system in which there can be no positive terms. As Rodolphe Gasché writes:

Philosophical concepts would be entirely homogeneous if they possessed a nucleus of meaning that they owed exclusively to themselves -- if they were, in other words, conceptual atoms. Yet since concepts are produced within a discursive network of differences, they not only are what they are by virtue of other concepts, but they also, in a fundamental way, inscribe that Otherness within themselves. (Tain 128)

"Otherness" obtains then not merely in the space between "philosophical concepts" or, more generally, between the apparently self-identical elements of a differential network, but actually in an interval breached "within" those elements for, as Gasché elaborates, "No concept . . . can be thought rigorously without including the trace of its difference from its Other within itself" (129). This trace difference fissures identity, prohibiting it from ever being present to itself as such, while with the same movement impelling it on a detour through that which it is not, an act of reference which re-presents the entity back to its ruptured self in terms of its own alterity. Derrida calls this movement of disruption, referral, and re-presentation the "trace." He writes, "the trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself" ("Différance" 156). What should be emphasized here with respect to "inscription" is that, as a re-presentation of that which can only be present "by the
anterior default of a presence" (OG 145), the trace re-presents nothing that was ever present as such; rather, its re-presentation is of its own de-presentation of identity by a reference to that which it is not. The trace is thus an arch confrontation, an originary reference: a reference to reference which, in the resistance it poses to itself in its own self-displacement, constitutes the simulacrum of reference of which all other referential effects, including that of a self-identical referent, are repetitions.

In a similar way, de Man's notion of "inscription" constitutes the inaugural movement which, to use Derrida's words, separates "the represented from the representor" (OG 203), provided, of course, that we understand these terms in a non-subjective way. Inscription, we have said, opens the space of language's difference from itself, establishing the interval or position between signifier and signified which is the condition of possibility of signification de Man calls linguistic "materiality." Because it is constitutive of representation and reference, this indeterminate space, like the random event which produces it, lies on the far side of representability: relating to "nothing that comes before or after," the inscription of materiality refers to nothing, at least nothing identifiable as a proper referent. And yet, in the blank undecidability of its contingent disruption of presence, the materiality of the letter does indicate and thus refer to something: the imageless act of its own taking place. As with the Derridean trace, this inaugural reference is not to anything determinably present as such and thus capable of arresting the movement of reference. Rather, it refers to the disarticulating act which, in opening the space which allows language to "emerge from the crypt where it prefers
itself" (OG 193), prohibits the positing of any such final, self-identical referent. The space which is necessary for reference to be possible is thus also the unresolvable difference which forbids the sort of continuity between the material and phenomenal aspects of language which we associate with "meaning." Language emerges as an object of cognition and as a determinate phenomenon to which reference may be made only by an effacement of the incoherent "anterior default of a presence" (OG 145) which occurs in the act of its own taking place, that is, in the movement de Man calls "inscription."

Language thus comes into being through the agonism of two inseparable but absolutely incommensurate functions such as those which we have seen described by Warminski, Caruth, and others: on the one hand, the "uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" (de Man, HI 37) which opens a space for language, and, on the other, the imperative of description or figuration which must efface the radical incoherence of that space if language is to stand forward with any sort of particularity. These collateral movements of capricious disruption and recuperative erasure constitute the initial act of reference by which language enacts or "posits" itself.

"The starting, catachretic decree of signification is arbitrary" (HI 48) writes de Man, neatly summarizing the aporetic structure of linguistic positing. Whatever identity language seems to possess is not intrinsic; rather, it is conferred by the figurative imposition of a name onto the blank materiality which makes itself "felt" at the moment of its disarticulating inscription. But, like a performative speech act such as a "decree," inscription makes reference to nothing beyond the instance of the fact of its own taking
place, an event for which, because it consists in the opening of a space for language, there could be no determinate, literal term and therefore no ground for figuration. Such a caesura is nameable only by way of an abuse of language, a catachresis — "the trope which coins a name for a still unnamed entity, which gives face to the faceless" (de Man, *Hl* 44) — which arbitrarily imposes a form upon the abyss inscription opens, thus effacing its blankness. There is therefore no motivated link between material inscription and figuration. Language's only "contact" with the reality of the event of inscription occurs in the reflex of figuration by which language turns itself away from the disarticulating violence of inscription, erasing its incoherent blankness while figuring itself forth as an intuitable phenomenon, however negatively constituted its "identity" may be. Language thus "posits" itself, "in the sense," writes Chase, "of laying down what had no previous existence" (8). In doing so, it sets "the phenomenal intuition . . . in motion" from which, de Man writes, "all other substitutions follow as in a chain" (*Hl* 48).

We must stress that language cannot simply convey the phenomenality of the real: any motivated continuity between the real and its representation, between the material and the phenomenal, would render signification, which we have said requires an arbitrary, "material" element, impossible. Rather, the effect of an intuitive apprehension of the real as phenomenal, or as given to us rather than imposed, follows from the originary phenomenalization of languages by means of the catachrestic self-declaration de Man calls positing. In effacing the arbitrary conditions of its production (i.e. the material conditions of signification), and positing itself as a determinate entity to which reference
may be made, language is the first "phenomenon" and, as such, serves as the guarantee of the possibility of the intuitability of all the world. Intuition in turn, de Man writes, "implies perception, consciousness, experience, and leads at once into the world of logic and of understanding with all its correlatives, among which aesthetics occupies a prominent place" (RT 8). Language functions, in short, as a figure of understanding and serves "as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition" (RT 11).

If reference and all of its cognitive effects are products of a more primordial "totalizing power of language" (de Man, WV 91), then language itself must be conceived, as Culler says, in terms of an act rather than as representation ("Reading Lyric" 104). This performative element of language, moreover, is heterogeneous, consisting not merely in the figural imposition of form on the blank space of inscription, but in the restless double movement which simultaneously opens and effaces that space. There is a fundamental incommensurability between these two actions which renders each a deadly threat to the other. Figuration, for example, eclipses the incoherence of linguistic materiality sufficiently to confer "the authority of sense and meaning" (de Man, SD 117) upon its heterogeneity. But such impositions are at best provisional, subject always to dislocation by the "uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" -- the return of the repressed of language -- which in its utter purposelessness and sheer accidentality, harbours a death-like capacity to disrupt the shapes spread upon its senseless materiality, rendering it impossible to determine whether those patterns are significative or not. This undecidability, from which Saussure was compelled to turn and which, as we shall see
Aarsleff and other linguistic historiographers elide in the texts they interpret, has the power, Culler writes, to obliterate "the assumption that linguistic structures are given as perceivable and intelligible" ("Reading Lyric" 105). In such a bind, we "witness," what de Man describes as "the undoing of the phenomenality of language which always entails (since the phenomenal and the noumenal are binary poles within the same system) the undoing of cognition and its replacement by the uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" (HI 37). The capricious performativity of language thus manifests itself inevitably as a threat to phenomenal apprehension, "beginning with the notion of 'language,' but extending to all manner of thinking, including the notion of the human subject" (Clark, "Monstrosity" 280). Consciousness can only "preserve" itself in the face of this disruptive force by effacing its traces with an act of figuration.

Of such gestures, the figure of silence is perhaps the least opaque, its unintelligibility a literal token of the blank deathliness in language from which it seeks to turn. In its peculiar eloquence, Saussure's silence shadows forth the mute background against which any metalinguistic statement will be made. The silence is always there in works on language (as it is in any text), but it declares itself more stridently as philosophers and linguists unpack the implications of the arbitrary nature of the sign. Nor is the silence restricted to works on language. It is repeated, for example, in the lacunae and diversions which we find in the texts of those who seek to tell the history of linguistic thought. Just as Saussure was compelled to swerve from the other-than-rational side of language he confronted in his anagrammatic research by creating the
"science" of language we find in the *Cours* (which is, as de Man notes, "anything but an authoritatively monolithic text" [HI 38]), Aarsleff and other linguistic historiographers are able to maintain the coherence of the histories they tell -- as histories of language study and not, say, as narratives of a more heterogeneous discourse in which the term "language" performs a unifying function rather than a representative one -- only by eliding the non-determinate dimension of language exposed in works by Saussure and others who have contributed to that history.

4. Tradition and Betrayal

After this lengthy detour, we may now return to a consideration of linguistic historiography with a better sense of the challenge which a non-phenomenal linguistics poses to the possibility of a coherent history of linguistic thought. As Saussure's anagrammatic research suggests, and as we shall see in our reading of texts by Locke, Johnson, Priestley, and Tooke, there is an aspect of language which, because it cannot be completely reduced to interpretability, or entirely explained in terms of language's referential function, challenges the authority of language as a paradigm of phenomenal cognition. And yet, it is precisely such a phenomenal notion of language which provides texts like Aarsleff's with the coherence necessary to produce what he calls "the sort of explanatory and enlightening quality we seek in history" (*Study* vi). A non-phenomenal notion of language is clearly disruptive to any such project, and not merely because it disrupts the identity of language as an objective fact fundamentally stable through time.
What we have called the "materiality" of language exceeds language in such a manner that it disrupts the coherence and integrality of other concepts as well, including history. As a discipline in which language and history are explicitly articulated, linguistic historiography is a field in which the traces of the exorbitance common to both language and history but proper to neither are most likely to leave their marks upon the text. It is this structural imbrication of language and history, and the destabilizing excess it exposes which attracts me to the field of linguistic historiography. As de Man notes of the concept of "modernity," "the problematic structure of a concept that, like all concepts that are in essence temporal, acquires a particularly rich complexity when it is made to refer to events that are in essence linguistic" (LHLM 144). It is this richness which I seek to explore throughout this thesis; in the following sections I will consider the implications of a non-phenomenal linguistics for "traditional" notions of history.

I have said that the link which binds together the texts which Aarsleff claims comprise the "main tradition" in language study in the West since the late seventeenth century is the rejection by linguists and philosophers of the word-thing habit. What Aarsleff does not acknowledge, however, is the possibility that, rather than being a simple "mistake," the confusion of words and things might be an effect of the same linguistic operations which make it possible for him to construct a coherent history of language study. The unity of such a history depends on a conception of language as a positive phenomenon with the ontological status of "an objective fact" (de Man, LHLM 164), something whose empirical condition transcends and exists apart from the various
contexts in which the word signifying that fact might appear. And yet, as its own medium, language is always marked by an irrecoverable excess of what we have seen Ferguson describe as the ontological over the epistemological. And although the notion of language as an objective fact would certainly be applicable in the case of the Adamic doctrine (where it would be verified by the word "language" itself), it is not so in the case of those theories which constitute Aarsleff's "main tradition" of linguistic thought. In rejecting the Adamic doctrine, Locke implicitly suggests the possibility of an unmotivated, arbitrary link between signifier and signified: this idea bears with it, however, the disturbing possibility of an impossible "moment in which the sign stands free of its significations" (Chase 96) and with it the spectre of a non-positive, non-phenomenal space in (or more precisely of) language. The material "moment" is absolutely incommensurate with and in excess of any of the empirical qualities which might provide language with the factual "presence" which would guarantee that a "history of language study" would be the history of a determinate phenomenon: neither truth nor error, positive nor negative, it exists as the negation of all determinate notions, including the idea of a determinate negative. Although it constitutes what Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser refer to as "the unwritten and unwritable . . . base of utterance" (xii), linguistic materiality is ultimately "knowable," not "in terms of a graspable entity" (xiii) but only in the multifarious forms of its effacements. Language is available as an object of study only by way of the imposition of form upon this blank "base." "As real as anything we know" (xii), the materiality of this effaced foundation is confused with the
presence and identity of a determinate phenomenon which, as such, seems to give itself to perception. The phenomenality of language serves, in turn, as a paradigm for the possibility of cognition, that is, as Culler explains, for the sense of a world of "phenomena that are given to perception (as opposed to an imposition or positing of forms)" ("Reading Lyric" 104) and what Cynthia Chase calls the "illusory presence" ("De Man" 195) we attribute to these things.

It is precisely such a phenomenal notion of language which underlies the history of linguistic thought which Aarsleff relates. There is a contradiction, however, between the tradition Aarsleff posits and the conditions which would be necessary for such a tradition to be possible. Thematically, the tradition Aarsleff describes is based on the rejection of the word-thing habit, formalized most explicitly in the Adamic doctrine which, Aarsleff says, Locke challenges in the Essay. Rhetorically, however, that tradition depends on a phenomenal notion of language, that is, on a conception of language as an empirically-determinate entity, ontologically (although not necessarily morphologically) stable throughout the history of its study. Locke's anti-Adamic notion of language, however, implicitly forbids such stability: in exposing the arbitrariness of the relationship between the sensory and cognitive elements of the sign, Locke's theory (regardless of his intentions in formulating it as he has) adumbrates a material dimension -- that is, the differential space of the incommensurability of the material and phenomenal aspects of language -- which prohibits language from ever possessing the self-identity which would be necessary for such stability.
In failing to acknowledge the non-phenomenal dimension of language towards which Locke's text gestures, Aarsleff repeats an error cognate with the "mistake" (LS 24) against which he says Locke's linguistic thought was directed. The Adamic notion of language confuses words and things; Aarsleff, I have said, takes words for things. But these two confusions are related. "Adamic linguistics" confuses the phenomenality of language with the phenomenality of things: it assumes a continuity between the meaningfulness of words and the phenomenality of their referents. There is, however, a certain commensurability between words and things in that, from the perspective of a non-phenomenal linguistics, they occupy a common cognitive plane as phenomenalized effects of the effacement of the materiality of language. Put another way, they are links in the same chain of substitutions of which the phenomenalization of language is the first: speakers may confuse words with things, but the possibility that they may do so is built into language in the mechanism by which it comes into being in the first place. From the perspective of a non-phenomenal linguistics, the confusion of words and things only repeats the more primordial confusion (which is its condition of possibility) of the resistance which the materiality of language poses to cognition with the sense that language possesses a phenomenal presence. Adamic linguistics is thus a corollary of phenomenal linguistics. Although Aarsleff establishes the rejection of the former as the basis of the tradition he describes, he does not consider the implications of that rejection, either for the phenomenal notion of language, or, just as importantly, for the related idea of tradition.
Aarsleff's "tradition" may also be read as a record of the effacement of that which would render such a phenomenal history impossible. As a means of approaching this problem, we might note that such a possibility is inscribed in the word "tradition" itself. Derived from the Latin verb *tradere*, to hand down, transmit, or teach, tradition, as Aarsleff uses it, implies the passing on of a particular conceptual stance towards an object of knowledge. If, however, the phenomenality of that object is ultimately an effect of the obliteration of a dimension of it which resists representation and cognition, tradition will also involve a betrayal of its object, although "betrayal" here should be understood as structural and thus necessary, rather than subjective. The possibility of betrayal is etymologically present in "tradition" as well for along with the "handing on" of something, *tradere* also signifies to give over or surrender. It is from here, for example, that our words "traitor" and "betrayal" are derived. Tradition then, we might say, is both a handing on and a handing over, a passing down and a passing off. In language study, the handing on of knowledge requires a betrayal of the object, an effacement of that exorbitant dimension of language which will not be conveyed or passed on. This betrayal takes the form of a misrepresentation. Tradition is thus also traduction.

5. The Materiality of History

In "Literary History and Literary Modernity," de Man suggests that such a betrayal is fundamental to the operations of literature and, by implication, to language. The processes of literary history, moreover, he writes "could in fact be paradigmatic for
history in general" (164). As an entity which "steadily puts its own ontological status into question" (165), literature is characterized by an unresolvable tension. On the one hand, it is driven by an impatient impulse to free itself from history and "fulfil itself in a single moment" (152) -- a desire de Man identifies with the spontaneous creative energy typically associated with "modernity." 18 On the other hand, literature also consists in that disruptive action's paradoxical effect of "engendering" the very "repetition and continuation of literature" (162) with which it seeks to break. Literature emerges as a describable phenomenon, in other words, only on the basis of a betrayal of that which is most properly its own: its own (improper) desire to "break out of literature toward the reality of the moment" (162) and thus escape history and literature. Oscillating between the disruptiveness of an action which seeks to move beyond literature into a realm of perfect self-expression and the necessary folding of that act back into the text of literature and history (or more specifically perhaps, into a history) to which it thereby gives duration, literature is caught in a "fluctuating movement of aborted self-definition" (164). Like the Derridean trace, it exists as the simulacrum of the identity from which it seeks to escape: its specificity, de Man writes, "is defined by its inability to remain constant to its own specificity" (159). Or, as he puts it later in the same essay, literature "both betrays and obeys its own mode of being" (164). 19 (In his later work, de Man will transfer what he says here of literature to language itself).

This inconstancy -- this betrayal -- marks the dense complexity of a structure in which both history and language are imbricated. Common to both but proper to neither,
the operations of this structure are thus apparent in history as well as in language. De Man finds evidence of this homology in Friedrich Nietzsche's "Of the Use and Misuse of History for Life." In his polemical response to the unreflective historicism which he believed prevailed among his German contemporaries, Nietzsche distinguishes history from modernity, or "life" as he calls it, describing the relationship between them as one which, de Man says, "goes beyond antithesis or opposition" (151). In Nietzsche's formulation, history and life function as the non-coinciding but inalienable counterparts of a relationship in which each "engenders" the other while, with the same gesture, forbidding that other from fulfilling itself. In the case of history, such a self-completion would take the form of a monumentalized tradition; in the instance of "life," it would manifest itself as a fully present moment which, in its detachment from history, would stand as its own origin. "Considered as a principle of life," de Man writes, "modernity (or 'life') becomes a principle of origination and turns at once into a generative power that is itself historical" (150). In the "curiously contradictory" logic of this structure, history and modernity simultaneously supplement and disrupt one another in a manner which, by denying history the possibility of coinciding with itself, opens the space of difference which allows the repetition, and thus the effect of duration, which history "is." Like the fluctuations of literature "away from and toward its own mode of being" (163) with which they are coextensive, the oscillations of history and modernity expose a structural difference or space which, although it functions as the animating principle of history, has itself "nothing to do with temporality" (de Man, "Kant and Schiller").
This dimension, which we might alternatively call the space of the historicity of language and/or the space of the linguistics of history, de Man refers to in "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric" as "the materiality of actual history" (262). Regardless of what we call it, there is one point on which we must be clear: "history," in de Man's idiosyncratic idiom, is not reducible to the sequential, diachronic patterns of narrative, although it is as narrative -- as texts and figures -- that history will "masquerade" (164). History, rather, consists in the incommensurability of what Kevin Newmark describes as "the tropological structure of cognition and the historical forces of inscription" (225). Events -- the material of history -- happen and leave traces in the world. The materiality of their occurrence, however, is not irrefutably positive, nor is it inherently meaningful. The positivity of the historical event, like its meaningfulness, and its temporality are tropological effects "generated," as Carol Jacobs explains, "out of a series of repetitions that give the illusion of sequence or linear temporal order" (107). Even when one knows oneself to be "witness to history," this knowledge arises only because whatever event it is which one experiences -- a word, a deed, a death, a thought, a text -- is, in itself, utterly random and, as such, pathetically insignificant. (Indeed, it is the rhetorical effects of this pathos which this thesis addresses). And yet, it is precisely in this randomness that the power and authority of occurrence lies. De Man describes this deathly power and its necessary recuperation by the categories of historical narrative (including those of literary history) in "Shelley Disfigured." There he writes that the disruption of the text of The Triumph of Life by Shelley's death, reminds us that nothing,
whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence. It also warns us why and how these events then have to be reintegrated in a historical and aesthetic system of recuperation that repeats itself regardless of the exposure of its fallacy. This process differs entirely from the recuperative and nihilistic allegories of historicism. (122-3)

History thus consists in a struggle between the inscription of an event utterly indifferent to human desires for meaning (i.e. "a positional act, which relates to nothing that comes before or after," [SD 117]) and the effacement of that disruption in a figurative reflex in which the inscrutable materiality of the event is confused with and taken for the phenomenality of a moment, fully present to itself, given to the understanding, and motivated by its place in a continuous sequence of moments similarly self-identical.

In identifying the narrative of these events with allegory, moreover, de Man points to the fundamental non-coincidence of figuration and its texts with the material reality of the occurrence on which figuration is nonetheless dependant. Unlike the symbol, which "postulates the possibility of an identity or identification" (de Man, Temporality 207) of the substance and its representation, allegory designates a difference which de Man variously characterizes as literal and temporal. For example, allegory presupposes the "pure antiority" (Temporality 207) of a sign to which the allegorical sign necessarily refers but with which it can never coincide. Unlike the symbol, in which the relationship between substance and representation "is one of simultaneity, which, in turn is spatial in kind" (Temporality 207), the allegorical sign and its referent are divided by a gap which
is unbridgeable because it is, at bottom, temporal. "Time is the originary constitutive category" of allegory (Temporality 207), writes de Man. In designating "primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide," allegory "establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference" (Temporality 207). But, in its repudiation of nostalgia, the void constitutive of allegory also resembles "the materiality of actual history" (ATL 262), that non-phenomenal dimension where history and language first cross paths.

Although unavailable to cognition as "a graspable entity," the workings of this material void in which language and history are imbricated and which allegory signifies, are evident in the tensions and assymetries which appear in a text between its cognitive dimension -- its meanings -- and the processes and structures which carry those meanings without themselves signifying (what de Man, speaking of Benjamin, calls the "nonconvergence of 'Meaning' with 'the devices that produce meaning'" [RT 66]). Nor may a text assimilate this limit by somehow becoming aware of its processes and then representing them. As the passage from "Shelley Disfigured" suggests, the incommensurability of the "historical" occurrence and "the recuperative and nihilistic allegories of historicism" (122-3) is a radical one which is also irreversible. Although inscribed in the rhetorical disjunctions in the text, the materiality of that limit is inaccessible to the text's representation: figuration can never exhaust or fully answer the material conditions to which it responds and on which its own figurality depends. The material occurrence which brings the text into being is always beyond the reach of the
text, available to it only as what Levinas calls "traces of the irreversible past . . . taken as signs that ensure the discovery and unity of a world" (345), and which constitute the unassimilable excess which animates every text with the restless, self-displacing quality de Man identifies with "allegory."\(^{21}\) The unreadability of this dimension, an unreadability which we must stress is not a prelude to readability but radically structural in nature, is precisely that which the empirically-minded linguist or linguistic historiographer must repress if he or she is to produce any sort of coherent representation of language or the history of its thought.

As allegory, history consists in the non-coincidence and incommensurability of the heterogeneous event or "material occurrence" which disrupts the paralysis of the text of history and the "illusion of sequence or linear temporal order" (Jacobs 107) which the repetitions which arise from those random disruptions generate. As such, the historical text is the simulacrum of a displaced presence. The random event which generates the text, however, also exposes the heterogeneity of history which, like literature in de Man's description, "exists not as a single moment of self-denial, but as a plurality of moments that can, if one wishes, be represented -- but this is a mere representation -- as a succession of moments or a duration" (\textit{LHLM} 159). History thus represents nothing that was ever present as such: its representation, rather, consists in the effacement of the heterogeneity and randomness of the event out of which it is generated, an event with which it cannot coincide, but the resistance of the materiality of which is confused with and conferred upon a "past" which thereby acquires the hallucinatory phenomenality of
something once present.22 The past, imagined as a \textit{determinate presence}, is thus a
textual effect.23 As such, it is subject to the disjunctions of "the materiality of actual
history" which manifest themselves in the rhetoric of the historical text, rendering it
always an allegory of history. As with literature, the specificity of history consists in its
failure to do anything but displace or betray its own specificity in a random movement
of disruption and recuperation out of the irreconcilable oscillations of which the illusion
of a continuous historical sequence is generated. Although "as real as anything we
know," the random occurrence which generates this effect is impossible to represent "in
terms of a graspable entity" (Budick and Iser xii); rather, it is characterized by a surplus
which always outstrips whatever pretensions a text might have to represent the real, an
excess which marks both the space in which history and language occur, but also the limit
of their capacity to remain true to their own identities. In short, historical narrative
imposes a diachronic structure and thus a continuity on what was in essence a plurality
of unique and randomly-occurring moments, expressible as positive and determinate only
in tropes of sequence which efface the materiality and heterogeneity of the moments they
seek to represent. The materiality of history, although it is the principle and dimension
which is the condition of possibility of determinate notions of temporality, succession,
progression, and history, is thus itself beyond temporality, at least, that is, temporality
viewed as the continuous and positive flux of things rather than as a breach in the identity
of such determinate phenomena. As the temporal dimension of language, moreover,
linguistic materiality necessarily exceeds literal expression, a possibility the literary
theorist, like any "serious thinker about language," including the historian of language study, will confront in his or her attempt to offer an exhaustive account of the processes constitutive of signification. Invariably, the theorist's own language will register the tensions and disjunctions in which the material dimension of both language and history is shadowed forth.

Throughout "Literary History and Literary Modernity," de Man emphasizes the incommensurability of history and its representations. His ultimate warning concerning history conceived as "the diachronic narrative of the fluctuating motion we have tried to describe" is startling in its directness: "such a narrative can be only metaphorical, and history is not fiction" (163). But what would this other history look like? How might we write history in a way which took account of or acknowledged in some way its unrepresentable operations? Even to identify the materiality of history with an "event" is to attribute to it a temporality which is not properly its own. History's temporality is a figurative effect -- thus, a fiction -- imposed upon the traces of randomly occurring events, events, moreover, unmotivated by the history in which they are, with such gestures of figuration, declared to possess a place. In de Man's terms, those histories which fail to acknowledge the material dimension of actual history, are not history. They are "fiction," in his radical sense of the word. The question thus becomes, if the representation of history is necessarily allegorical, doomed to repeat the materiality it cannot represent, how might one prepare a history which somehow acknowledged, or took account of this "other" history?
This question is crucial to this thesis's concerns. As a first step towards an answer, one might begin by recognizing that, in its blankness, the effaced dimension of history constitutes a site of ideological struggle. As such, in returning to the works which comprise the subject matter of linguistic historiography and reading for the caesurae and diversions in which the material dimension of history and language leaves its traces in the texts, we discover that "language" names a site of contest among ideological forces, all struggling not so much to describe some "objective fact" which corresponds to the term "language," but rather to efface the fact of their inevitable failure to do so and, furthermore, to construct this effacement in terms which serve their own interests, whether they be those of class, race, or gender. In the Enlightenment text, language, we find, acts as a sort of catachresis which allows theorists to abandon theologically-anchored arguments without relinquishing the positivity of the concepts with which they wish to deal. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, for example, to which we will now turn, the concept of "language" functions so as to allow Locke to posit understanding as a determinate phenomena to which the empirical method might be applied. It is precisely this catachrestic but also pragmatic dimension of works on language which phenomenal interpretations such as Aarsleff's repress, or at least, which they cannot acknowledge without having to abandon the notion of language as a coherent referent and consider it rather as a site of a discursive contest, the tentative identity of which is bound up with that of all other concepts, including history.
Chapter Two

"Something, he knew not what":

John Locke and the Fiction of History

1. Linguistics and The History of the Same

With its rejection of the notion that a knowledge of things is possible prior to and independent of our experience of them, John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* opened the door for a conception of language, mind, and society as reciprocally conditioning elements whose interrelated development constituted the driving force, trajectory, and content of history. Locke, for example, proclaims the social character of language in the opening sentence of the Essay's Book Three where he writes: "God having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society" (III, I, i).¹ The social nature of language provided, in turn, the overarching context for the notion, popular among the Essay's eighteenth-century readers, that language and mind existed in a dynamically-interdependent relationship. Readers found the suggestion of this link in a passage from the Essay in which Locke considers the possibility that the great majority of terms -- those for mixed modes and simple ideas
of reflection -- are metaphorically derived (or "transferred") from the words for simple ideas of sensation:

It may also lead us a little towards the Original of all our Notions and Knowledge, if we remark, how great a dependence our Words have on common sensible Ideas; and how those, which are made use of to stand for Actions and Notions quite removed from sense, have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible Ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations, and made to stand for Ideas that come not under the cognizance of our senses; *e.g.* to Imagine, Apprehend, Comprehend, Adhere, Conceive, Instill, Disgust, Disturbance, Tranquility, etc. are all Words taken from the Operations of sensible Things, and applied to certain Modes of Thinking. *Spirit*, in its primary signification, is Breath; *Angel*, a messenger[.]

Locke goes on to suggest that by discovering the metaphors which underlie the terms for "Ideas that come not under the cognizance of our senses," and following these back to their literal roots, it will be possible to understand the minds and thoughts of the first speakers. "And I doubt not," he continues

but if we could trace them to their sources, we should find, in all Languages, the names, which stand for Things that fall not under our Senses, to have had their first rise from sensible Ideas. By which we may give some kind of guess, what kind of Notions they were, and whence derived, which filled their Minds, who were the first Beginners of Languages; and how Nature, even in the naming of Things, unawares suggested to Men the Originals and Principles of all their Knowledge. (III, i, 5)²

For many readers, Locke was encouraging a belief that the true meaning of words was to be found in their provenance. This was certainly the case with John Horne Tooke whose work we will examine in Chapter Seven. More generally, however, with this passage, Locke places the relationship between language and knowledge in a dynamic,
historical framework in which words (despite the claim he makes in the opening sentence) are not *simply dependent* on ideas. In positing the possibility that the progress of knowledge is contingent upon the metaphorical (or, more precisely, the catachrestic) elaboration (or "transfer") of a root vocabulary consisting only of words for "sensible" or simple ideas, Locke suggests an interdependent relationship between language and knowledge in which each possesses the capacity to expand the stock of the other. The transfer of words borrowed "from ordinary known *Ideas* of Sensation" allows speakers to "make known to others any Operations they felt in themselves, or any other *Ideas*, that came not under their Senses." Such an augmented vocabulary, in turn, provides them with the means to express all ideas: "when they had got known and agreed Names, to signify those internal Operations of their own Minds, they were sufficiently furnished to make known by Words, all their other *Ideas*; since they could consist of nothing, but either of outward sensible Perceptions, or of the inward Operations of their Minds about them" (III, i, 5). Furthermore, because of language's function as "the great Bond that holds Society together" (III, xi, i), the mutual development of language and knowledge is bound up in a fundamental way with social cohesion and, implicitly, social progress.

Although Locke does not explicitly develop the links he suggests in this passage, they nonetheless inflect his discussion of language, becoming most apparent in his insistent call for ethical thinking and civil society. Those who wrote after him, however, elevated the notion of the mutually-supplementing relationship of language, knowledge, and social progress into a crucial principle of the linguistic thought of the eighteenth
century and beyond. Foremost in this regard is Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac. In his *Essai sur l'origine des connoissances humaines* (1746), published in English in 1756 with the subtitle "A Supplement to Mr. Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding," Condillac argues that, just as "every language expresses the character of the people that speak it" (285), each of those languages has "in its turn an influence on manners," which is to say, has an effect upon the social and cultural identity of a people (299, §162).³

In his scrupulous refutation of Noam Chomsky's version of linguistic history, Hans Aarsleff states that, contrary to Chomsky's contention that eighteenth-century linguistic thought was dominated by Cartesian principles, the most important figure of the period, "both as a theorist and by virtue of his influence" (107), was Condillac. This influence is particularly apparent in the frequency with which the notion of the reciprocally-determining development of language, thought, and society (or various combinations of them in which the question of all three is evoked) asserts itself in the literature on language which appears in the latter half of the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth, several examples of which I will examine in this thesis. To Rousseau, for example, the interdependence of language and society raises the question of which came first, a puzzle which, in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), he bequeaths to posterity: "To whoever wishes to undertake it, I leave the discussion of this difficult problem, which has been more necessary: society already formed for the institution of languages, or languages already invented for the creation of society" (qtd. in Aarsleff 156). Rousseau's quandary reflects
the aporias which attend any discourse which invokes origins in its attempt to discern the character of language or society. For example, in order for language to have had its origin in society, the structures and signifying codes constitutive of language would have to have had been in place already at the moment in which language came into being. As Geoffrey Bennington has noted, "how do you say yes to the social contract, or sign it, if the contractors are not already bound by a code permitting a minimum of mutual comprehension?" (233) The "yes," however, does not mean that that language is the necessary precondition for the creation of society. Bennington goes on to point out that the social contract also (and unthinkably) presupposes the prior existence of the very society which it is said to inaugurate. He explains "the idea of a social contract must give to time a twist it is unable to think, insofar as at least one of the parties to the contract has its existence only through the contract it is nevertheless supposed to be able to sign, and therefore is supposed to precede" (233). Given the curiously regressive logic of the structure of reciprocal supplementation which exists between language and society, each necessary for the other to come into being, it seems that the origin of either is an event which cannot punctually take place. The impossibility of its punctually having taken place in fact makes all stories of the origin of either society or language into retrospectively imposed fictions.

The logic and empirical validity of these fictions is implicitly tested in other works on language from the period. For example, when in 1769 the Berlin Academy of Science posed the question, "Are men, left to their natural faculties, in a position to invent
language, and by what means do they, by themselves, accomplish that invention?" (qtd. in Gode 171), Johann Gottfried Herder answered that language and thought originated together and were inseparable in their development. His *Essay on the Origin of Language*, which won the Academy's prize, was published in 1772.

Condillac's ideas are no less evident, however, in a landmark work which appeared in 1836, Wilhelm von Humboldt's extraordinary *On Language*, which Aarsleff also locates within the Lockeian tradition. In positing language as a steadily changing phenomenon constituted in the dialectical play of, on the one hand, a "truly creative performance of the mind" (qtd. in Harris and Taylor 156) or *energeia* which fires every utterance (and which he elsewhere refers to as "labour" [qtd. in Harris and Taylor 155]) and, on the other, the conventions of grammar and phonology -- the product, work, or *ergon* -- to which that activity must conform, Humboldt casts the relationship between language, mind, and society in a form we may recognize from our discussion of modernity and history in de Man. Like modernity, *energeia* is the burst of life which animates language. Although it must conform to the contingencies of the historical context in which it occurs (things like grammar, for example), *energeia* has the capacity to disrupt and remake those forms, much as modernity, in Nietzsche's essay, generates the very history from which it seeks to escape. In describing this unresolvable tension in language and mind, Humboldt only makes more explicit a tension which had been in play in this "tradition" from (at least) the moment Locke sought "to enquire into the Original, Certainty and Extent of humane Knowledge" (I, i, 2) without recourse to
innatist principles. The oscillations of energeia and ergon, like those of modernity and history, expose a space in which the concepts of language, thought, society, and history are strangely imbricated. Common to each but proper to none, this irreducible dimension of radical alterity constitutes, in its capacity to produce differences, the condition of possibility for the emergence of all such apparently determinate concepts. At the same time, however, in its utter indifference to human desires for presence, it is also that which prohibits any of these concepts from ever achieving the sort of absolute self-identity which would allow it to emerge as an immanent expression of energeia, capable of existence outside of the network of difference in which it is inscribed. Each of these concepts depends for the determinateness of its identity on its difference from the other. But because no single element in this system is "present" as such except by a self-disrupting diversion of that "self" through its other, no element could be said to exist apart from or prior to any other. All elements are determined by an "absolutely irreducible" opening which, as Derrida says of spacing, "operates in all fields but precisely as different fields" (*Moscou aller-retour*, qtd. Internet, 21 Jan. 1996., Trans. Peter Krapp; *Positions* 82).

If identity is the effect of a concept's position relative to all others in a network of difference in which no element is ever present to itself except by the "anterior default of a presence" (Derrida, *OG* 145), and in which presence is always an effect of the co-appurtenance of the one to the other, it will be impossible to determine with any sort of absolute certainty which concept might precede another or was the condition which
allowed that other to come into being as such. As a result, all claims of the precedence of one element with respect to another, such as we find throughout this tradition, are tropological effects generated out of the relationships of difference which obtain among those elements, metaphors which make "a sequence out of what occurs in fact as a synchronic juxtaposition" (de Man, LHLM 163) and which, in doing so (and in order to do so) must efface or repress the differential dimension in which both are imbricated. 4

No element in this system is immanent; identity is an effect of the opening of a position in a network of difference, a spacing which is utterly non-teleological in its occurrence. No simple entity is original in this system, no element leads to or produces another, and no identity is contingent upon that of another except insofar as those identities are constituted in the mutual disruption of each by the other in the movement and moment of spacing. Instead of identity, there is repetition and, in doubling that which is without identity and imposing upon that repetition a metaphor of sequence, the hallucination of linear development is produced. With it come the illusions of progress, tradition, inheritance, origin, etc. which are the wherewithal of Enlightenment discourse. But because such narratives of historical continuity are generated by the difference produced by a repetition which is ontological rather than historical, no diachronic sequence or tradition can be said to be immanent. 5 Furthermore, because the fundamental repetition is of that which is in itself without identity or telos, the order of all such sequences and narratives is, in the final analysis, reversible. Thus, whether language precedes mind or mind language, ideas words or words ideas, society language
or language society, is simply a matter of the point from which one wishes to begin what is ultimately an effort to resolve an unresolvable condition by effacing the dimension or element which is the source of that indetermination. Every "origin" in this network of elements will be marked by what Bennington calls "the 'yes' that precedes every supposed inaugural performance" (231). The "yes" is an accession to language, to the fact that the structures of language -- what Derrida calls the "au-delá" of language (OS 129) -- are there before any origin and before all attempts to render the origin thinkable. Because of this "yes," which is always prior, the event of origination cannot take place as such. Rather, its ever-receding possibility produces the need to produce, after the fact, the fiction of its having-taken place.

The fiction of origin, along with the indeterminateness of identity which is its corollary, make questions of precedence and antecedence subject always to the sorts of reversals we find between the texts which comprise the corpus which, after Aarsleff, I am describing as the Lockean tradition. One such reversal is apparent, for example, between Locke's Essay and Horne Tooke's Diversions of Purley. For Locke, a word is the sign of an idea: despite his rejection of innatist principles, he reserves for the mind a natural capacity to reflect on its own processes (thus producing simple ideas of reflection) and to act on and combine simple ideas of both sensation and reflection into complex ideas.6 For Tooke, however, writing one hundred years after the Essay, Locke got it precisely backwards. There are, Tooke maintains, no innate mental operations whatsoever. The mind is entirely passive, its business, "as far as it concerns language"
extends "no further than to receive impressions, that is, to have sensations or feelings. What are called its operations, are merely operations of language" (25). The reversibility of terms is most explicitly articulated, however, in Tooke's claim that the errors arising from Locke's residual innatism might be exorcised with his system losing none of its coherence through a simple substitution of one set of words for another:

I only desire you to read the Essay over again with attention, and see whether all that its immortal author has justly concluded will not hold equally true and clear, if you substitute the composition, etc., of terms, wherever he has supposed a composition etc., of ideas. (19)

Whatever his intentions might have been in making such a provocative claim, a reversal as dramatic as the one he here performs has the effect of exposing the utterly contingent nature of the identities of the terms which comprise the key concepts of the Enlightenment discourse on language. Tooke thematizes the contingency of identity by way of an extravagant rhetorical strategy in which he simulates the process by which effects of identity are produced. Maintaining that the truth of words is to be found in their origins, Tooke's Diversions consists for the most part of several thousand etymologies. These, however, are products more of his rhetorical ingenuity, than of his historical acumen. Tooke's word histories create a mesmerizing mirage of fact. In their extravagance, however, they disclose the very absence which they are invoked in order to conceal.

In pointing to a space where identity is not given in advance, Tooke exposes the indeterminate site which Rousseau implicitly acknowledges when he admits his inability
to solve the chicken-and-egg problem of language and society. By reversing the terms of Locke's argument, Tooke explicitly thematizes the tendency to inversion and oscillation which occurs at a rhetorical level among the key terms in all texts in (and out of) the Lockean tradition. In doing so, he brings to the fore a dimension of linguistic functioning, repressed in Enlightenment discourse (indeed, whose repression might be said to characterize the discourse of the Enlightenment) but which, as Wolfgang Iser and Sanford Budick have said of negativity, is "as real as anything else we know" (xi) yet indescribable "in terms of a graspable entity" (xiii).

I have said that Locke's rejection of the innatist principles of Cartesian rationalism was coextensive with the rise of new notions of the great degree to which language was bound up with the identity and development of such other phenomena as mind, society, and history. Tooke's thematization of the contingency of the relationships among these elements suggests, however, that relationality is invoked in such schemes only insofar as it serves to produce and maintain the positive identity of the elements which comprise the coherence of the particular system of thought to which they belong and to ward off the threat to immanence and identity which any assault on innate principles bears with it. While the non-identity of two phenomena or elements may be taken in a provisional and pragmatic way as evidence of the self-identity of each, difference, when interrogated with any sort of critical rigour whatsoever, can easily slip into self-difference. It is against this consequence of the rejection of innatist principles that Locke's text, like many of those in the eighteenth century which follow his lead, seeks to protect itself. Regarded
in this light, it is evident that what is being performed in the early texts of the tradition Aarsleff describes is not simply a positive description of phenomena such as language, but also an effacement of an undescrivable, material dimension which must be repressed if the identity of the elements in these systems of thought, and thus the positivity of the systems themselves, is to be made possible and preserved. Not examinations of the phenomenal, then, but also effacements and repressions of the undescrivable. The two gestures go hand in hand, the blindness of one enabling the unavoidably aberrant insight of the other. What seem to be the fruits of empirical investigation turn out on further examination to be the consequences of an elaborate effort to palliate and efface the disruptive work of an undescrivable realm of linguistic operations which asserts itself with greater insistence as soon as one dismisses essentialist arguments, be they Cartesian or Adamic. Such gestures of cognitive self-preservation, or as de Man puts it, efforts to find "shelter . . . from self-erasure" ("Sign and Symbol" 770), are repeated in the texts of those such as Aarsleff who seek to tell the history of linguistic thought non-linguistically, and from within a framework of reference derived from the very texts they seek to describe. In other words, a coherent history of linguistic thought is possible only to the extent to which the historian repeats the same patterns of blindness as those which generate a determinate representation of language in the texts he or she studies. At which point one must ask whether such an account is history at all, or just more of the same, more fiction. Certainly a history which did not take language for granted, that is to say, which did not assume that language is in order to tell a coherent history of those who
have said what it is would tell a different story than the "fictions" to which we have become accustomed. It would still, however, not be a story which escapes the errors constitutive of insight.

Martin Jay has commented on the repression of the negative in Enlightenment texts. In The Dialectical Imagination, he observes:

the greatest failing of the Enlightenment mentality was not its inability to create social conditions in which name and thing might be legitimately united, but rather its systematic elimination of negation from language. This was the reason why its substitution of formulae for concepts was ultimately so destructive. The philosophy of the Enlightenment was overwhelmingly nominalist rather than realist; in Benjamin's sense, it recognized only the speech of man, ignoring God's. Man was the sole name-giver, a role commensurate with his domination of nature. Language thus became, to use Marcuse's later term, one-dimensional. Incapable of expressing negation, it could no longer voice the protest of the oppressed. Instead of revealing meanings, speech had become nothing more than a tool of the dominant forces in society. (263)

The repression of negation, with the concomitant political implications to which Jay here alludes, manifests itself in the discourse on language as an avoidance of what Andrzej Warminski calls the "linguistic negative," a negative which confronts that of which both Hegel's "determinate negation" (bestimmte Negation) and Heidegger's "Nothing" (Nichts) (Warminski xxxi) are figures. The linguistic negative surfaces, Warminski says, in "an other, heterogeneous, asymmetrical excess or lack irreducible to the work of the dialectical or ontological negative" (xxxii): in Hegel and Heidegger it is the dimension which the philosophical text must "forget" in order to constitute itself as such. Such forgetting -- or more precisely, such an "arbitrary imposition" of what Warminski calls
"meaning for marking (i.e. semantics for syntax)" (xxxiii) -- is constitutive of all texts, 
qua texts. In a minimal sense, every text consists of that which is said and that which 
is not said. The two, of course, are inextricably bound up in the possibility of any 
utterance: if nothing were left unsaid, if there were no omissions or lacunae in a text, 
that text or utterance could not stand forth as such. It is their difference which generates 
discourse out of the anonymous system of signs and the laws which govern their 
combination (Kristeva, _Language_ 9). Furthermore, because the "said" and "unsaid" are 
both putatively positive (the "unsaid" being what Derrida calls "presence at a distance" 
[Positions 81]), we can "say" what is present and what is absent in a text, although the 
latter is clearly a potentially infinite enterprise. What we cannot say, however, is the 
nature of the relation which obtains in the "inherent doubling" (xii) of presence and 
absence, of saying and not saying, and the oscillation between them which, Budick and 
Iser explain, "forms the unwritten and unwritable -- unsaid and unsayable -- base of the 
utterance" (xii). The distinction here then is between the double (which is an effect) and 
the doubling (which is the condition of possibility of the effect), between the unsaid and 
the unsayable. To repeat: we can speak the positivities of both the said and unsaid. We 
cannot, however, speak or describe the negativity which obtains between them because 
that negativity is the condition of possibility of saying itself: it is the movement which 
transforms _langue_ into discourse. But, although impossible to describe "in terms of a 
graspable entity" (xii), negativity may be described "in terms of its operations" (xii), or 
more precisely, in the erasure of "its own discernible operation," negativity's movement
of self-resistance and self-displacement -- the fluctuation of its aborted self-definition -- is shadowed forth.

The tendency of Enlightenment texts to repress the enabling work of negativity raises two linked questions with regard to the representation of language in those texts. The question of the nature of language remains as much in play in my discussion of the texts I will examine in these pages as it is apparent in those texts themselves. The question presents itself to us, however, at the end of a long detour which we must take through another question, a question, moreover, in which that of the nature of language becomes imbricated and all but lost with the apparently more general question concerning the nature of phenomenality and cognition. The question: how does language function in these texts on language? In responding to this query, the case of Locke's *Essay* is paradigmatic of what I shall call the "diversionary" manner in which a concept such as language functions in the texts we will examine, and as paradigm is worth discussing before turning to the texts of Johnson, Priestley, and Tooke. Locke's celebrated diversion into language in Book III of the *Essay*, I shall argue, is an effort to preserve the phenomenal conditions which make his empirical project possible from negativity's disruptive forces. Thus, with his notion of nominal essences, Locke blames language for distortions which occur in our understanding of the world. But here, as in the other texts we will read, language functions as a sort of catachresis or empty word whose appearance of fullness is the diversion which obscures the play of other motivations in the text. As I shall explain, the most conspicuous emblem of the repression of the absolute other of
identity in Locke's text is the celebrated tabula rasa, a figure, as de Man has noted, of modernity.

2. Locke on Substance: Standing Under Understanding

Locke is generally considered to have been compelled to include a discussion of words in his inquiry "into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge" (I, i, 1) because of the fundamental inextricability of thought and language. There is nothing extraordinary about such a possibility, if it is indeed the case. Far more interesting than any compulsion he may have felt to include language in his discussion of understanding, however, is his initial thought that he might actually exclude it. The connection between thought and language had been a philosophical commonplace at least since Aristotle contended that "Speech is the representation of the experiences of the mind, and writing is the representation of speech" (qtd. in Robins 22). In Locke's century, the fundamental relationship between thought and language was the basis for the influential notion that, underlying all languages, there existed a universal grammar, the principles of which, when uncovered, would reveal the basic structures of thought and the laws of reason common to all people. The concept of universal grammar received its most widely-known treatment in the seventeenth century in the rationalist Grammaire générale et raisonnée (or the "Port-Royal Grammar" as it was known after the Port-Royal Abbey which housed the Jansenist educational foundation which produced this and other related works). As Hans Aarsleff has pointed out, Locke was an attentive and sympathetic
reader of the works of the Port-Royalists (LS 45, 283). Given this context, it is not surprising that Locke's discussion of understanding should require a collateral examination of language. What is surprising, however, is the fact that he apparently does not realize this until he is part way through his work on the Essay. "I must confess," he writes in Book Three:

that when I first began this Discourse of the understanding and a good while after, I had not the least Thought, that any Consideration of Words was at all necessary to it. But when Having passed over the Original and Composition of our Ideas, I began to examine the Extent and Certainty of our Knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with Words, that unless their force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning Knowledge. (III, ix, 21)

This is all quite astounding. The apparent fact that, prior to and even during the composition of the Essay, Locke thought it possible to describe understanding on its own terms, as a determinate phenomenon or process available, it would seem, to perception or reflection as an entity describable in its own autonomous self-hood, highlights the rationalist undercurrents of his project. Locke's original wish to consider understanding alone, however, should also alert us to the extent to which the Essay, despite its inaugural rejection of the opinion "established . . . amongst some Men, That there are in the Understanding certain innate Principles; some primary Notions . . ., Characters, as it were stamped upon the Mind of Man, which the Soul receives in its very first Being; and brings into the World with it" (I, ii, 1), is unwilling (or more accurately perhaps, unable)
to relinquish the notion of the autonomous self-identity of concepts and phenomena which rationalism, like other doctrines with essentialist aspects, had implicitly maintained.\textsuperscript{9}

The tension generated by the contradictory desire to advance a theory of the arbitrariness of the sign while preserving the ontological stability of language and other phenomena manifests itself most explicitly in Locke's \textit{Essay} in the difficulty he confronts in his treatment of substances. In the \textit{Categories}, Aristotle argues that a substance is that which exists independently and not as the predicate of some other subject. The predicates of a substance may change with time, but the substance itself will remain the same, (barring, of course, changes in those qualities which are essential to its persistence and cohesion as a unified whole). Substance thus maintains an asymmetrical relationship with its predicates: although it may support them, it cannot itself be predicated of anything else. Substance is, in a sense, the essence of a thing, as opposed to its appearance or the genus or kind by which it is identified.

Most of these ideas are evident in Locke's discussion of substance. But substance also leads a curious double life in the \textit{Essay}: in its evasions, alibis, and repressed knowledges, Locke's account of substance shadows forth an obscure dimension of "matter without presence" (Derrida, \textit{Mémoires} 52) homologous to the unrepresentable space differentiating "marking" and "meaning" which de Man calls linguistic "materiality." Locke's substance seems a displacement of the prephenomenal excess de Man describes, one, however, which refuses to consider that dimension as anything other than positive. For example, although the idea of substance is one which, properly speaking, Locke says,
"we neither have nor can have by sensation or reflection," it is also an "idea which would be of general use for mankind to have, as it is of general talk as if they had it" (I, iv, 18). Although we talk about substance as if we have an idea what it is, it is, like de Man's materiality, precisely that for which we can have no idea: substance produces and supports ideas. Ideas of substance arise, Locke argues, on the basis of the "confusion" of "an obscure and relative idea of substance in general" (II, xxiii, 3) with our sense of the self-subsistence of any particular phenomenon which meets our understanding, a case of mistaken identity as we shall see, in which language plays no small part. Our impressions of substance are of uncertain epistemological merit: for Locke, what we call substance names a dimension of things which, although available to the understanding, bears only a confused and unreliable relationship with the real essences of substances. Those real essences, although underlying all determinate phenomena and essential to their intuitability, are in themselves unavailable to understanding. What we take to be "substances" are to a large degree effects of the obtrusion of language upon understanding: in bundling together a number of simple ideas, names produce the effect that those ideas are the qualities of an underlying substance with a coherent and positive identity.

Locke defines substances as an order of complex ideas, the complexity of which has been forgotten, superceded by a ghostly other idea which emerges with that forgetting: "the ideas of substances," he writes, "are such combinations of simple ideas as are taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves; in which the
supposed or confused idea of substance, such as it is, is always the first and chief" (II, xii, 6). This spectral presence, like so many other monsters in Locke, is generated by language. Through their constant appearance together, the simple ideas which comprise a particular complex idea of substance are

presumed to belong to one thing, and words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called, so united in one subject, by one name; which, by inadvertency, we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one simple idea, which indeed is a complication of many ideas together; because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some substratum wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call substance. (II, xxiii, 1)

Although adequate in a practical way for our day-to-day dealings with the world, ideas of substance in general, when subjected to inquiry, expose a featureless and foreboding abyss at the heart of understanding. Because it is that which underlies the aggregate of qualities which we identify with each particular phenomenon, and which thus serves as the core and essence of the being or thing-ness of each, substance should be the most determinate of referents. If, however, one seeks to identify the locus of substance in general, Locke explains, "he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what support of such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us" (II, xxiii, 2). Locke continues, it is words which efface these blanks in our knowledge, standing in for understanding and stemming, however provisionally, the strange retreat of sense to which the notion of substance gives way upon the least interrogation:
If anyone should be asked, what is the subject wherein Colour or Weight inheres, he would have nothing to say, but the solid extended parts: And if he were demanded, what is it, that Solidity and Extension adhere in, he would not be in a much better case, than the Indian . . . who, saying that the World was supported by a great Elephant, was asked, what the Elephant rested on; to which his answer was, a great Tortoise: But being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-back’d Tortoise, replied, something, he knew not what. . . . The Idea then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown, support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist sine re substante, without something to support them, we call that Support Substantia; which, according to the true import of the Word, is, in plain English, standing under or upholding. (II, xxiii, 2)

The curiously regressive logic of this search for the source of ideas bears a striking resemblance to the chicken-and-egg paradox which Rousseau and others confront in their search for the origins of language and society. Regardless of how far back one traces the chain of qualities, none gives way to something which is the origin of all. Instead, over and over, one confronts the infinitely-receding horizon of an "origin" which, perversely, is already there and upon which Locke must retroactively impose the status of a foundational moment or element. In illustrating his dilemma with the fable of the "Indian," Locke points to the fictional dimension of this imposition. His choice of an occidental "other," however, to bear the illustrative burden of the threat to cognition which the fiction of substance marks, also implies that that which lies at the edges of or beyond or beneath common sense -- and that which is most threatening to the empiricist ethos -- is somehow also that which is most un-English. Today, similar anxieties are displaced by scholars onto that group of Frenchified theorists who defy common sense
not with Elephants, Turtles, and the "something-they-knew-not-what," but with
différence, materiality, énoncé, and other chimeras from the post-structuralist bestiary.

The origin Locke "discovers" in substance has a crucially important role to play
in his epistemology. In standing under (or "Under-propping" [II, xiii, 20]) those qualities
we perceive and providing them with the support they need to become the objects of
understanding, substance also tacitly supports the notion of understanding itself, at least
understanding as Locke defines it as "Perception, or Thinking" (II, vi, 2) -- not the
arbitrary imposition of form upon the mute, material abyss which his description of
substance seems at certain moments to intimate.

And yet, in pointing out the groundlessness of our ideas of substance, Locke
seems to reject the notion of the phenomenality of things, that is, the sense in which the
real gives itself to us, "flowing" from the world to understanding. Indeed, our notions
of substance seem to be quite actively constructed, curiously enough, by an understanding
which, "in bare naked perception," Locke maintains, is, "for the most part, only passive"
(II, ix, 1). For example, in elaborating his notion of substances, Locke seems to dismiss
the apparent fact of the intuitability of the real, suggesting that our ideas of particular
substances are an effect of simple ideas whose repeated co-appearance generates a sense
of "something besides" themselves, a "confused idea of something to which they belong":

An obscure and relative Idea of Substance in general being thus made, we
come to have the Ideas of particular sorts of Substances, by collecting
such Combinations of simple Ideas, as are by Experience and Observation
of Men's Senses taken notice of to exist together, and are therefore
supposed to flow from the particular internal Constitution, or unknown
Essence of that Substance. Thus we come to have the Ideas of a Man, Horse, Gold, Water, etc. of which Substances, whether any one has any other clear Idea, farther than of certain simple Ideas coexisting together, I appeal to everyone's own Experience... [O]nly we must take notice, that our complex Ideas of Substances, besides all these simple Ideas they are made up of, have always the confused Idea of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist: and therefore when we speak of any sort of Substance, we say it is a thing having such or such Qualities, as Body is a thing that is extended, figured, and capable of Motion; a Spirit a thing capable of thinking; and so Hardness, Friability, and Power to draw Iron, we say, are Qualities to be found in a Loadstone. These, and the like fashions of speaking intimate, that the Substance is supposed always something besides the Extension, Figure, Solidity, Motion, Thinking, or other observable Ideas, though we know not what it is. (II, xxiii, 3)

But what here seems to be an exposition of the groundlessness of our ideas of substance and thus a gesture towards the demolition of the notion of the understanding's capacity to intuit the real is in fact just the opposite — part of a strategy to preserve the understanding as the apprehension of a reality which, although not always available to perception, is nonetheless positive. For, in supporting the qualities which produce our ideas and providing them with what Fredric V. Bogel calls a "stable and abiding core of ontological presence" (30), substance also stands under understanding, providing it with a determinate identity and presence. Locke nowhere denies the existence of an ontological substratum: rather, he reinscribes the concept in such a way so as to deflect any threat the radical indeterminateness of substance — as the sub-version of ideas for which we have no idea — might pose to his conception of understanding as "perception."

Neither does he seek to contradict the notion that ideas flow to the understanding from the world: what he describes, rather, is the diversion of that flow by the capricious
workings of a more treacherous bit of cognitive plumbing, "the great Conduit, whereby Men convey their Discoveries, Reasonings, and Knowledge, from one to another" (III, xi, 5): *language*.

Locke makes language bear the burden of the indeterminateness which is apparent in the problem of substances.11 As we have seen, although substance is that dimension in which the qualities which we identify as those belonging to a particular kind of thing inhere and which thus serve as its ontological centre, that core is itself unavailable to cognition. To account for this puzzle, and perhaps to palliate the threat it poses to the notion of cognition as the intuited apprehension of the real, Locke distinguishes two aspects of substance, or "essences" as he calls them, one real, the other nominal, both, however, related to understanding:

The measure and boundary of each Sort, or *Species*, whereby it is constituted that particular Sort, and distinguished from others, is that we call its *Essence*, which is nothing but that abstract Idea to which the Name is annexed: So that every thing contained in that *Idea*, is essential to that Sort. This, though it be all the *Essence* of natural Substances, that we know, or by which we distinguish them into Sorts; yet I call it by a peculiar name, the *nominal essence*, to distinguish it from that real Constitution of Substances, upon which depends this *nominal Essence*, and all the Properties of that Sort; which therefore, as has been said, may be called the *real Essence*. (III, vi, 2)

Nominal essences are taxonomic; real essences are ontological. More precisely, nominal essences "stand for sorts" (III, vi, 1): the term signifies the possession by a particular thing of those qualities essential to it if it is to be identified as a member of a certain kind or "species." Essence in such cases is comprised of those general ideas abstracted from
experience (which although always particular, is rarely, as we shall see, strictly our own) and gathered together and fixed by a specific name. In contrast to this, the real essence of a phenomenon is the (unknowable) "internal constitution" which underlies and produces those qualities which serve as the basis for nominal essences. But although they are the foundation and "source" (III, vi, 3) of the abstract ideas to which the names of species and genera are "annexed," real essences coincide only uncertainly with the nominal essences (which nonetheless depend on them). One cannot be simply mapped onto the other, although this is the error we regularly make when we take our taxonomic understanding of the world for knowledge of real essences. We know nominal essences necessarily for they are the aggregate of qualities which mark a phenomena as a member of this or that sort; they are, in a manner which recalls the tautological reasoning of scholastic metaphysics, that by which something is said to be known. To know real essences, however, would be to know the foundation of those qualities which comprise nominal essences, what Locke calls the "constitution" of a thing from which its qualities "flow." Such knowledge requires a perspective which Locke reserves for God and the Angels (III, vi, 3).¹³

Despite the non-coincidence of nominal and real essences, the former "depends," Locke says, on the latter. As the source from which "flow" the qualities understanding uses to "sort and name Substances" (III, vi, 26), real essences are "the foundation of all those Qualities, which are the Ingredients of our complex Ideals" (III, vi, 3). But, although it is the "particular internal constitution" (II, xxiii, 3) upon which the qualities
associated in the mind with this or that substance depend and in which those qualities inhere, real essences are themselves unavailable to cognition.

One way in which we might make sense of this strange ontological dimension which, although it is both the support and the source of those qualities which we perceive and use to order things, is itself without qualities, would be to explain it in terms of the atomic and chemical theories of matter emerging around the time Locke was composing the Essay. Thus, when Locke speaks of the "real internal Structures" (III, vi, 24) of things, we may take him to be referring to what one commentator calls "the microstructural atomic organization of a macroscopic object" (Lowe 76). And yet, as the same reader notes, such scientific explanations tend to elide the metaphysical function which the "substratum" plays in Locke's examination of understanding. E.J. Lowe observes

The point is that substratum, for Locke, seems to have a metaphysical role to play above and beyond any merely scientific explanatory role which could be offered by the doctrine of atomism. For precisely because individual material atoms themselves have a multiplicity of qualities (even if we cannot detect them, lacking the technology to do so), the metaphysical question of what "supports" these qualities and makes them "stick together" as qualities of a single atom can still be asked, if it is ever proper to ask such a question at all. (76)

Pressed to confront the improper and describe what supports the qualities apparent at an atomic level, the scientist faces the same blank limit as the "Indian" asked to say "what gave support to the broad-back'd Tortoise" and, like the Indian, must reply, "something, he knew not what." Such an answer, however, begs the question of substance. It
assumes, for example, that there is something "out there" and present in the world from which flow the qualities the understanding perceives. And yet, it is precisely this assumption which allows Locke to preserve the understanding as a positive, determinate phenomenon. Regardless of whether or not the "internal constitution" or real essence which supports the qualities we perceive is some chemical or atomic prime matter, the notion of an ontological dimension, seen or unseen, existing independently of mind and serving as the ground of all which we perceive, is indispensable if understanding is to be preserved as that which intuits the phenomenal. For, if it is necessary to anything, substance is essential to the maintenance of a notion of understanding as that which apprehends the real, regardless of what havoc might subsequently befall those perceptions.

Without some notion of a positive reality existing external to the mind and from which "flow" the ideas which impress themselves upon the understanding, the boundary between understanding and the real becomes blurred. As understanding fades into and merges with the world it would apprehend, the identity of each is lost and with it the certainty that understanding consists in the perception of the phenomenal. Suddenly, the possibility arises that the identity of both understanding and the real might be effects of a process belonging properly to neither, a "something-we-know-not-what" so radical that it is impossible to say with any certainty whether or not it possesses the positive, determinate status of a "thing" the limits of which might be measured. Both are posited
after the fact as "there." That hallucinated "there-ness," however, is not the same thing as the "already-thereness" of the strange, primordial "something-we-know-not-what."

Locke, however, draws the boundaries of the understanding and thus mitigates this epistemological chaos, by concentrating in words the power to "interpose themselves . . . between our Understanding and the Truth" (III, ix, 21). Language thus becomes an alibi for a "confusion" which is already there prior to any origin which might be retrospectively imposed, and a diversion from the absence which that origin effaces. The notion of nominal essences implies that it is language which is primarily responsible for misleading the understanding in its grasp of the real. Language, Locke argues, fixes the categories of those nominal essences which then pose as reliable representations of the real essences of substances: although we intuit the existence of substance in general, we are, in our understanding of real essences, at the mercy of the "artificial Constitution of Genus and Species" (III, iii, 15), a taxonomy of appearances patched together by the first speakers and institutionalized in language, a legacy of error which, by confusing our sense of substance with the boundaries imposed by language, obscures our knowledge of real essences. In this regard, tradition and language are the enemies of knowledge. Even if it were possible to discover the real essences of substances, Locke notes

we could not reasonably think, that the ranking of things under general Names, was regulated by those internal real Constitutions, or any thing else but their obvious appearances. Since Languages, in all Countries, have been established long before Sciences. So that they have not been Philosophers, or Logicians, or such who have troubled themselves about Forms and Essences, that have made the general Names, that are in use amongst the several Nations of Men: But those, more or less
comprehensive terms, have, for the most part, in all Languages, received their Birth and Signification, from ignorant and illiterate People, who sorted and denominated Things, by those sensible Qualities they found in them, thereby to signify them, when absent, to others, whether they had an occasion to mention a Sort, or a particular Thing. (III, vi, 25)

The theory of nominal essences preserves the possibility of understanding as a determinate phenomenon, centred in the subject, which receives ideas from things existing beyond its limits and powers. For while it suggests that language imposes a particular order upon the real, the notion of nominal essences never implies that language actually constructs or posits the real. Language only diverts that which is already flowing toward the understanding. Therefore, even though our ideas of the order of things may be quite mistaken, this diversion ensures that our grounds for assuming the existence of some essential order "out there" and independent of understanding are quite sound as is our sense that understanding is the largely passive receptor of qualities belonging to and supported by that reality.

By serving within his argument as that which diverts the effects of something, although perhaps unknowable in itself but nonetheless positive, autonomous and distinct from cognitive processes, language marks the border line between the world of appearances and the world of the real. In doing so, it preserves the positive presence of the real, as well as that of the understanding towards which the ideas produced by that reality flow.

As such, it seems that language is not brought into the Essay simply because no account of intellection is complete without it, although this, in a curious way, is true.
In order to represent understanding as a "complete" entity, positive, self-subsisting, centred in the subject, and distinct from the reality it perceives, some "other" is necessary to serve, on the one hand, as that which separates the two, but also, by the same token, as that element in which the two might become confused. Language, as we have seen, is that other: it marks the difference between understanding and the real by serving as that which diverts the understanding in its perception of the real. Without the obfuscations and interpositions of language, understanding's difference from the world would be uncertain. But by functioning as that which leads the understanding astray in its perception of the real, language marks the limits of understanding and thus preserves the integrity of understanding as a determinate phenomenon.

3. Original Substance and the Diversion of Ideas

Locke maintains that he is forced to discuss language in the Essay because "there is so close a connexion between Ideas and Words" (II, xxxiii, 19). So close is this connection, in fact, that it is unclear at times where one begins and the other leaves off. The world which Locke describes is one haunted by confused identities: words are taken for the things for which they stand, and ideas are frequently misled by words. By attributing such confusion to language Locke is able to preserve the positive identity of substance and understanding and thus to keep the flow of ideas moving in a uniform direction from their source in the former to their reception by the latter. His efforts to
do so, however, are complicated by the fact that substance is not merely a phenomenon of the objective world: it is also the blank bedrock of understanding.

Locke's notion of understanding as the intuitive apprehension of the phenomenal is supported by the postulated presence of two different sorts of substance, one "corporeal" or "material," the other "spiritual" or "immaterial" (II, xxiii, 5). Both are characterized by the phenomenal blankness we have already described in relation to substance in general: while neither has any qualities proper to itself (or at least perceptible as such), both function as the element or dimension -- the "substratum" -- in which those qualities which are the source of our simple ideas subsist (II, xxiii,i) and inhere (II, xxiii, ii). There is, however, an important but subtle distinction to be drawn between them, a difference which allows cognition to be bracketed by determinate presences and thus rendered as an apparently self-identical phenomena. Material or corporeal substance is the propertyless source of those simple ideas which emanate from outside the consciousness of the perceiving subject. It has its counterpart in that "something, we know not what" which is the "Substratum to those Operations, which we experiment in our selves within," primarily "Operations of the Mind, viz. Thinking, Reasoning, Fearing, etc." (II, xxiii, 5). As it seems apparent that they neither subsist in themselves, nor belong to or are produced by the body, "we are apt to think these the actions of some other substance, which we call spirit" (II, xxiii, 5). Spirit, in other words, is our name for the imperceptible substance which supports those qualities which arise from the mind's operations. The mind (or that operation of mind called
understanding) perceives these qualities as ideas when it reflects on its own actions and it is this reflexivity which, in a subtle but important way, distinguishes spiritual from material substance. Qualities flow to the mind from the material substances which support and produce them. Spiritual substance, however, not only supports those qualities which flow from it to the understanding; it also functions as that "something" upon which those ideas are inscribed. Comprised of "thinking" and "perceiving" (II, vi, 2), understanding is foremost among those operations "we experiment within ourselves" and is thus an action of spiritual substance. But because that action consists of the reception of impressions (II, ix, 2), it has the curious distinction of being an operation which writes upon the blank surface of the very substance which produces and supports it: spirit, in other words, names the substance underlying not only the simple ideas which arise from the mind's reflection on its own operations, but also the substratum on which those ideas (along with all ideas, including those produced by the qualities of material substances) are inscribed when perceived.

That "something" which supports ideas in the understanding is thus as featureless as the substance in which the qualities which produce those ideas subsist and inhere. In describing it, Locke employs figures of blank and empty phenomena: the mind is compared to an "empty Cabinet" which comes to be "furnish'd with Ideas and Language" (I, ii, 15), it is a "dark Room" or "Closet wholly shut from light" (II, xi, 17), and like "white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas" (II, i, ii). The blank tablet, the famous tabula rasa, is thus the cognitive counterpart to material substance in what is
basically a telegraphic model of understanding. Morphologically, mind and material substance are homologous: both consist of "something" which is not perceptible supporting something else — ideas in the one case, qualities in the other — which is. Functionally, *tabula* and material substance are mirror images, the two poles of a telegraphic structure: perfectly "fitted" (II, i, 24) to each other, one receives the "impressions" the other gives, or sends. Together, with their blank but nonetheless determinate presences, they mark the bounds of understanding.

So similar are *tabula* and material substance that it seems it would be easy to confuse them, one blank, or absence, being very much like another. Such a mix-up, however, would be disastrous for the cognitive process which Locke describes in the *Essay*. For example, with the distinction between qualities and ideas unsettled, it would be impossible to say with any certainty whether it was substance which impressed its "ideas" upon understanding or the opposite. The positions of substance and *tabula* might, in fact, be reversed, were the identity of each not inextricably bound up with the place each occupies in the cognitive relay. To suggest, however, that cognition is anything other than the perception of phenomenal qualities flowing from substance to *tabula* would be to dismantle the identity of all the terms which comprise Locke's epistemological system. Thus, although *tabula* and substance are both characterized by blankness, Locke nowhere entertains the possibility that that blankness is anything but a positive value, or that, although beyond cognition, each is not self-identical.
As we have seen, Locke maintains the positive identity and thus the position of substance and mind by attributing any diversion in the flow of ideas between them (for example, in the confusion of nominal and real essences) to language. As the locus of this disruption, language marks the boundary between the two, making it possible to distinguish the one blank "something" from the other and thus to know which is impressing its "ideas" upon which, and which is source and which is terminus. And yet, for those qualities to be diverted in the manner Locke describes, the possibility of diversion would have to be inscribed within the structure of cognition prior to any corruption of its processes by the interpositions of an ostensibly foreign agent such as language. The diversion of ideas would necessarily precede their origin in substance: ideas would be already diverted before the fact of their "origin," their arch-diversion rendering all such origins fictions retrospectively imposed. In imputing to language any detour which occurs to ideas in their journey from substance to tabula, however, Locke is able to maintain the fiction of substance as the determinate source of pure and undiverted ideas. In doing so, however, he elides the possibility that the identity of substance’s strange presence, is "itself" not immanent, but rather a fictional effect of an arch-diversion we might call original substance. Derrida indeed speaks of de Man’s "materiality" as an "original materialism" which
does not fit the classical philosophical definitions of metaphysical materialisms any more than the sensible representations or the images of matter defined by the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. Matter, a matter without presence and without substance, is what resists these oppositions. (Mémoires 52)
Similarly, an original substance — a substance without presence, lacking even the presence of a determinate lack — would consist in the resistance it posed to oppositions such as origin and end, presence and absence which define the metaphysical notion of substance.

" Older" than those oppositions, original substance opens the space which is the condition of their possibility. Like the Derridean trace, it does this by way of a self-displacing movement of reference to that which it is not. In inscribing within itself "the trace of its difference from its Other" (Gasché 129) and thus forbidding itself from ever being present to itself as such, original substance opens the space necessary for the oppositions to which it gives rise, simulating, in the resistance it poses to itself in the irreducible movement of its own self-disruption, the presence of which the apparently self-identical terms of the oppositions are repetitions. Confusion, in this case, consists in taking that resistance as an indication of a positive, phenomenal presence. We shall see that, from this inaugural confusion follow all others in the text upon which Locke remarks.

4. Deixis and the Inscription of the Tabula

To put this another way, we might say that the positivity of Locke's featureless substance is the product of a metaleptic confusion -- the taking of an effect for a cause -- in which the self-identity of presence (and absence, i.e., "presence at a distance") is mapped back onto the blank space whose opening is its condition of possibility. When
Locke describes the actual process by which the confusion of words and things occurs, however, it becomes apparent that the blankness which he says underlies both substance and mind is neither simply positive, nor positively simple.

Locke claims that words become confused with things -- that is, they are believed to offer a reliable means of knowing the world -- because of the tendency of speakers to forget that words stand for ideas, not things. In assuming an undiverted relationship between words and the things for which they stand, however, we overlook the arbitrary manner in which the two are linked in our minds, and thus neglect what Locke calls the "double conformity" which obtains between our ideas for words on the one hand, and our ideas for the objects to which those words refer on the other. Eliding the dimension in which our ideas of words and of things are "annexed" to one another, we conveniently and pragmatically take words as reliable guides to the nature and order of things in the world. Our confusion thus occurs at the level of ideas: we misconceive the arbitrary relationship between our ideas for words and our ideas for things as a motivated connection between words and things.

Although Locke identifies the locus of the confusion of words and things as ideas, a key passage in which he describes the source of the "double conformity" suggests that the problem may, in fact, be grammatical. Locke opens his explanation of the conditions which give rise to the problem of "double conformity" by describing the crucial role which names play in the process by which abstract ideas are inscribed in the mind. He writes:
If therefore we will warily attend to the Motions of the Mind, and observe what Course it usually takes in its way to Knowledge, we shall, I think, find, that the Mind having got any Idea, which it thinks it may have use of, either in Contemplation or Discourse, the first Thing it does, is to abstract it, and then get a Name to it; and so lay it up in its Store-house, the Memory, as containing the Essence of a sort of Things, of which that Name is always to be the Mark.

By serving as the mark of the essence of a category of things, Locke here suggests (as he does in his notion of nominal essences to which these remarks are related) that names simulate a knowledge of things (i.e. real essences). Although he will maintain later in the section I quote here that the confusion of words and the things to which they refer occurs in ideas, this passage suggests that the condition of possibility of that confusion has much to do with the actual process or act in which names are fixed to ideas and laid up in the mind. Thus, he continues:

Hence it is, that we may often observe, that when any one sees a new Thing of a kind that he knows not, he presently asks, what it is, meaning by that Enquiry nothing but the Name. As if the Name carried with it the Knowledge of the Species, or the Essence of it; whereof it is indeed used as the Mark, and is generally supposed annexed to it. (emphasis added)

Here, Locke suggests that the confusion seems to arise, at least in part, because the question in response to which those abstract ideas are fixed in our minds -- "What is it?" -- implies much more epistemologically and ontologically than the nominal response by which it is apparently satisfied, for example, "It is a cat." Assuming, indeed usurping, the affirmative function of the predicate, the name seems to convey some knowledge of the essence of the subject of the sentence which it completes -- "It is a cat" -- which is uttered in response to the initial question, "What is it?" The authority of the name,
however, and the determinateness of that to which it refers, is a function not of its link with the referent, but rather of the grammatical position of that name relative to the subject which it completes. In this respect, it is the nature of that subject which presents itself as the source of confusion.

Locke, however, does not consider the confusion to be an effect of grammar or any such mechanical or nonsemantic aspect of language. The confusion he describes occurs between things which are both determinate objects of cognition: words on the one hand, things on the other. "Double conformity," in other words, is strictly a problem of mixed-up meanings in which the non-semantic dimension of language plays no role. The confusion arises, Locke says, from the way in which, as a matter of practical expedience, we forget that the link between words and things is ideational, not essential. Thus he concludes:

But this abstract Idea, being something in the Mind between the thing that exists, and the Name that is given to it; it is in our Ideas, that both the Rightness of our Knowledge, and the Propriety or Intelligibleness of our Speaking consists. And hence it is, that Men are so forward to suppose, that the abstract Ideas they have in their Minds, are such, as agree to the Things existing without them, to which they are referr'd; and are the same also, to which the Names they give them, do by the Use and Propriety of that Language belong. For without this double Conformity of their Ideas, they find, they should both think amiss of Things in themselves, and talk of them unintelligibly to others. (II, xxxii, 7, 8)

Words and things are articulated in the ideas which exist in the minds of the speakers: ideas refer to things, words refer to ideas, but in no way do words refer directly to things. The middle term, however, Locke contends, is all-too-easily forgotten. When
it is, words seem linked to the things to which they refer and to possess a special knowledge of those things.

Locke seems content with the priority his explanation of "double conformity" accords to ideas and meaning. Despite this, however, the passage in which he describes the conditions which give rise to that confusion suggests that the actual locus of the confusion may in fact be the specific linguistic mechanism by which the name is affixed to the idea and thus marked on the *tabula*, which is to say, it may be a matter of grammar, not meaning. Such a mechanism, while necessary for meaningful discourse to occur, is itself without meaning. The work of this non-cognitive dimension of language is most readily apparent in the problematic subject of which I have said the name in this process is the predicate. When we confront something of a sort with which we are unfamiliar, Locke says we ask, "What it is." The answer we get will necessarily include as its subject, or at least imply as such, an utterance or gesture which is indicational in nature, such as *That* is a cat." The demonstrative terms "this" or "that," uttered, or at least implied in the process Locke describes, belong to a specific class of pronouns and other indicators called deictics. Before we proceed with our analysis of the process by which Locke says words and things become confused, it is important to dwell for a moment on this curious and complex mechanism of language which, in the *Essay*, adumbrates a non-phenomenal dimension of language which must be already "there" if the sort of cognitive confusion which Locke describes is to occur.
Deictics are orientational words whose meanings may be determined only by reference to the context of the utterance in which they occur. For example, the answer "That is a cat" is meaningful or true only insofar as the speaker refers to something which he or she believes to be a cat. Deictics are important to linguistics and epistemology because the precision with which they point to their specific referents ("That cat [which I am indicating] is fat") seems to offer proof of the possibility of both the referentiality of language and of sense certainty. But, as Hegel demonstrates in his preface to the Phenomenology, deictics also constitute a major disruption to the actual possibility of the sort of referential and epistemological certainty they seem to promise. The capacity of deictics to attach themselves to any number of referents demonstrates that what appears to be the most specific of references is, in fact, the most general. Who, after all, is "I" but the speaker -- any speaker -- who utters the word? Where is "here" but the position -- any position -- from which the speaker speaks? And what is "this" but the thing to which the speaker points?

As these instances suggest, the meaning of a deictic is determinable only by way of a reference to the actual context of its utterance. Deictics thus refer ultimately not to any objective or substantial reality but rather to the instance in which they are uttered, that is, to their own act of reference, beyond which they have no objective referent. In their reference to reference, Émile Benveniste sees in deictics the inaugural gesture of all language, what he calls "the instrument of a conversion that one could call the conversion of language into discourse" (220). Deictics, he says are "'empty'" signs that are
nonreferential with respect to 'reality,' but which become "'full' as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse" (219). They are, in a sense, the "on" switch which activates the language machine, the mechanism which, as Wlad Godzich explains, effects "the passage from the virtuality of langue to the actuality of parole" (xvi).

The lack of "material reference" (Benveniste 220) in deictics foregrounds a dimension of linguistic functioning similar to what Paul de Man calls "inscription." For de Man, as we have said, language occurs by way of a singular and arbitrary act which opens the space within the sign (which is also the space of the sign) necessary for language to break the stony silence of its self-sameness and function as discourse. The space, opened as Cynthia Chase has observed, between the "meaning and the sensory component of the sign" (96), refers to nothing beyond the disruption of presence which marks its own taking place and which is, at once, the condition of possibility of reference and the condition which forbids reference from ever communicating with or reaching its proper object. Reference, in other words, only emerges as a possibility by virtue of the inaugural movement which renders it impossible, that is, in the resistance reference poses to itself in its own primordial movement.

Similarly, in their reference to "the instance of discourse," (Agamben 25), deictics open a space in (and of) the sign which allows language to emerge "from the crypt where it prefers itself" (OG 193) and thus become discourse. Identifiable with neither the physical dimension of the sign ("saying") nor with its cognitive component (the "said"),
this opening, which Benveniste calls "utterance" (énoncé), comprises "the very act of producing an uttered, not the text of the uttered" (qtd. in Agamben 25). In opening this space, which refers to nothing but the event of its own taking place, and which takes place by way of a rupturing of identity by difference, deictics expose the blank, nonreferential substrata not only of language but of all concepts.

5. The History of Confusion

The non-cognitive dimension of language which deictics mark occupies a crucial but unremarked place in Locke's account of the process by which names and things become confused. Any acknowledgement of that dimension will have profound implications for Locke's theory of understanding but also for the tradition of linguistic thought to which, Aarsleff argues, that theory gave rise. We have said, for example, that Locke brings language into his theory of knowledge in order to distinguish substance from understanding and so preserve the possibility of knowing the world through the senses. Deixis, however, exposes a featureless dimension of language, whose positive presence, unlike the unknowable blanks which underlie and support qualities and ideas, cannot be taken for granted. The "essence" of deixis, if it could be said to be essential, is interruption, that is, the opening of a space in which meaning may then be substituted - - hardly a sound basis for identity, and particularly not for the identity of a phenomenon on which the identities of other phenomena (i.e., understanding, substance) depends. If language, invoked in order to maintain the identities of substance and understanding, is
characterized not by a presence but rather by the disruption of presence by the nonsemantic force which deixis marks, the identity of those elements, along with the notion of cognition they support, is placed in some jeopardy. No longer, for example, may one presume the identity of any of those elements to be immanent: identity may well be an effect generated out of a structure of difference, the inaugural space of which is opened in utterance and marked by deixis.

The evidence of a deicitical mechanism at work in the fundamental processes which give rise to the confusion of words and things suggests, moreover, that whatever identity we attribute to substance and understanding might, in fact, be an effect of a more original confusion in which they, along with all other concepts, are posited together (or, we might say, con-founded). The grounds of this confusion would not be something as determinate as the Lockean idea in which words and things are articulated and confused. It would consist, rather, in the resistance felt in the opening of the material space of language (which deixis marks) being taken for that of the phenomenality of something actually present -- a radical confusion of what Warminski calls "meaning" for "marking" (xxxiii). In conferring a phenomenal form (or "meaning") on the materiality of the space of difference exposed in the deictical moment ("marking"), such a confusion is necessarily also an effacement of the blank space of difference which, as Derrida notes, "operates in all fields, but precisely as different fields" (Positions 82). Substance and understanding are thus simulations or "fictions," retrospectively imposed in the
effacement of the space whose opening is the condition of their possibility. The blank substrata by which Locke characterizes both in the Essay are tokens of this effacement.

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Another fiction, crucial to the identity of the elements which comprise Locke's theory and, like them, imposed in the effacement of the materiality which deixis exposes, is that of a history conceived as organic, continuous, and coherent. As with language with whose identity it is bound up, Locke invokes such a conception of history in order to explain how words become confused with things. There is, we have noted, a historical dimension to this confusion: words, Locke says, are the work of "ignorant and illiterate People, who sorted and denominated Things, by those sensible Qualities they found in them" (III, vi, 25). Through our use of the language laid down by or derived from that of the first speakers, we are the unfortunate beneficiaries of an almost ineluctable tradition of error. In using words handed down to us, we unwittingly repeat the taxonomic errors embedded in language by the first speakers, confusing the nominal essences those words denote with the real essences which they obscure.

The coherent history of error which Locke posits as contributory to the confusion of words and things, however, obscures a more primordial confusion which is its necessary condition of possibility. This other confusion also marks an other dimension of history, quite unlike that which Locke describes, but apparent, nonetheless, in the moment of the deictical gesture in which names are affixed to ideas in understanding. The confusion of the materiality of utterance which deixis marks with the phenomenality
of something actually present — i.e., of marking with meaning, of grammar with meaning
-- is, in a sense, a confusion of one sort of history with another -- of a history
characterized by duration, with an other, which consists of an act which disrupts such
coherence, what de Man refers to as "modernity."

Deixis marks history as act. The unremarked presence of deixis in Locke's
description of the process by which the name is inscribed in the tabula implies that the
apparent identity of the elements which comprise his epistemological theory is an effect
of a confusion in which the resistance generated by an act of inscription is taken for and
conferred upon things, which thereby acquire their phenomenal presence. As a disruption
of presence, however, the temporality of this act is radically other than that of the sort
of determinate history which Locke calls upon to explain the continued confusion of
nominal and real essences or, for that matter, which Aarsleff, almost three centuries later,
will rely upon in describing the "main tradition" of linguistic thought. As the act which
opens the space in and of language necessary for signification to occur, deixis marks an
inaugural moment of reference which is utterly random and arbitrary in provenance.
Related to "nothing that comes before or after," its historicity resists the sort of neat,
organic unity of the coherent tradition of error which, Locke says, we inherit from the
first speakers, and to which he attributes our habit of mistaking nominal for real essences.
Rather, deixis allows us to distinguish between what Wlad Godzich describes as "a
history that is caught up in representation and one that is not" (xvii).
This "other" history, which de Man refers to as the "materiality of actual history" (ATL 262), precedes the history of error Locke describes in the sense that it must be "already there" in order for any coherent representation, whether of history or any other phenomenon to occur. Coherency is an effect of duration, but duration, as we have seen, arises from the repetition generated by the disruption of coherency. Deixis, for example, allows language to break out of the crypt of its self-sameness and become discourse. This "new beginning" has the paradoxical effect, however, of engendering the repetition and thus the effect of duration from which language, in the movement of deixis, seemed to break out of "toward the reality of the moment" (LHLM 162). Like de Man's description of literature then, language may be "defined by its inability to remain constant to its own specificity" (LHLM 159). History, moreover, like language, with which it is imbricated in the disruption deixis marks, consists in the same oscillating play of sameness and difference. History appears, we might say, in the fluctuations of its obedience to and betrayal of its own self-definition.

As that which most obdurately resists and disrupts notions of coherent identity, deixis and the material dimension it marks is precisely what Locke cannot confront, at least without risking contradiction of the assumption of the phenomenality of experience on which his empirical epistemology is constructed. Deixis exposes a site of radical confusion in which the phenomenality of things is not merely diverted by language, but actually posited in the inscription of language's material dimension. Far from being the effect of a coherent tradition of error, encoded and handed down in language, the
confusion of nominal and real essences is thus a necessary structural possibility of language, inscribed in the deictical mechanism which inaugurates and orients every utterance. It is also an intervention which renders uncertain the possibility of understanding as the simple speculum of phenomena which give themselves to it, a notion crucial to empirical epistemology.

Confusion is "always" there in language. Because it is a structural feature of language, it cannot take place with the monumental coherency of a singular and original event: its origin can only be produced after the fact of its having taken place, and then only as a fiction imposed retrospectively on the materiality of the space it has already exposed. It is therefore in order to palliate the disruptive effects of the material dimension which deixis adumbrates that Locke must produce the fable of a first confusion. Like his notion of substance, Locke's account of the first confusion of words and things by our "ignorant and illiterate" ancestors' bumbling attempts to know their world, is a fiction. But like the "something-he-knew-not-what" which supports the Indian's world, it is a fiction on whose back the whole of Locke's epistemology (and with it, the science of knowing-what-is-what) rests.

6. "Recapitulation": Hans Aarsleff and the Lockean Tradition

Tradition, therefore, is an effect of the very material dimension which forbids any tradition from being homogeneous. Every tradition oscillates in tandem with its own betrayal, a disruption which paradoxically generates the repetitions and thus the
hallucinations of the more-or-less coherent continuity which tradition "is." Tradition, however, does not obtain in the simple sort of temporal hierarchy which Locke invokes in the history of error he describes in the Essay, or which Aarsleff and others call upon in telling the story of the study of language.

Curiously, however, the section of Locke's Essay I have quoted in which Locke passes over the deictical moment and, with it, the other side of tradition which that moment exposes, is precisely one of the main passages which Aarsleff cites as the basis for what he conceives as the "main tradition" of modern linguistic thought. In his Introduction to From Locke to Saussure, Aarsleff sums up his work, and three hundred years of the main current of linguistic thought in the West, as an extended unpacking of the implications of Locke's notion of "double conformity":

In retrospect I can now trace the theme that holds my essays together to an observation that occurs in Locke's Essay. Locke said that speakers habitually believe that words are as good as things, "as if the name carried with it the knowledge of the species or the essence of it," thus assuming that language is a safe and simple nomenclature to the inventory of the world. (24)

As we have seen, the words which Aarsleff quotes, and which he says are the source of the coherence of his own text, follow a passage which suggests (contrary to Locke's explicit statements) that the confusion of words and things is not something which occurs in the cognitive realm of ideas and meanings, but is rather an effect of a nonsemantic dimension of language, specifically deixis. The possibility that knowledge is subject to the capricious operations of a material dimension of language unavailable to cognition
(and not merely diverted by a tradition in which words misrepresent things) casts some
doubt on the tenability of the empirical supposition of the continuity of perception and
knowledge. In other words, the passage which Aarsleff says embodies the thought which
holds his essays together, is also the one in which Locke's epistemology comes closest
to flying apart. Aarsleff, however, is able to posit his tradition only by repeating the
same repression of the material dimension of language and history as we have seen Locke
perform. Like Locke, Aarsleff skips over the disruptive possibilities flagged by this
passage and the sections from which it is taken, reiterating Locke's insistence that the
confusion of words and things is a problem of meaning, not grammar. For Locke,
Aarsleff explains, the belief that language offers a simple inventory of the things of the
world "is a serious mistake":

Words are about ideas, not about things; but the mistake is tenacious, "for
without this double conformity of their ideas, they find they should both
think amiss of things themselves, and talk of them unintelligibly to
others". (24)

Aarsleff's tradition is possible only by repeating the same effacements I have
described in Locke's Essay. Like Locke, for example, Aarsleff relies on a phenomenal
notion of language: he interprets what it is the texts in his tradition say concerning
language rather than, in Warminski's terms, actually reading those texts as negotiations
and repressions of the other of language and history. Locke's critique of the double
conformity problem, Aarsleff maintains, "was a critique that laid the foundation of the
modern study of language" (24). It also, however, constitutes the conceptual framework
of his own study: the tradition Aarsleff describes repeats the positive notion of history and language inscribed in the texts he interprets and with it, the same repressions, effacements, and evasions constitutive of those ideas. As such, we must ask whether this is history or fiction.

In the "Introduction" I noted John Bender's observation that, until recently,

Anglo-American investigation of eighteenth century literature proceeded largely within deep-rooted postulates -- within a framework of reference -- that fundamentally reproduced Enlightenment assumptions themselves and therefore yielded recapitulation rather than the knowledge produced by critical analysis. (79)

Hans Aarsleff's contribution to the field of linguistic historiography has been enormous. At the same time, however, one cannot help but feel that Bender's remarks are pertinent to Aarsleff's work as they are to that of the many other scholars currently contributing to this new field. Aarsleff maintains that it is his desire to "restore the study of language to its rightful place in intellectual history" (3). In pursuing the goal of restoration, however, he takes for granted something which a certain reading of these texts such as I have tried to practice here, reveals is not at all a settled question, that is: the question of the phenomenality of language and the sense that language "is." Aarsleff shares with the texts he interprets a basically phenomenal and positivistic notion of language. He actually places his research within the context and tradition of the works he describes. His essays, he writes,

are in fact linked by a single plan and by common themes that constitute the historical framework of the modern study of language. Agreeing with Condillac and Saussure that language is the first human and social
institution, I wish to restore the study of language to its rightful place in intellectual history. (3)

Aarsleff’s comments reflect a situation common in linguistic historiography as it is currently practiced. In reproducing in their work the same assumptions as those which underlie and inform the texts they read, the best insights of contemporary historians of language study are necessarily accompanied by a blindness to aspects of those texts which exceed that framework. A history which attempted to move outside of that frame, which, as in the present case, did not take language for granted, would differ considerably from the sort of coherent narrative of linguistic traditions which I have described. It would, for example, ask different questions of the texts it reads, considering, as I have sought to do here, what "language" names, what falls outside of or exceeds that naming, how that name functions in those texts, what it displaces, what it effaces, what it guards us from, and what it permits. In Locke’s Essay, for example, language acts as a sort of "Under-propping" (to use Locke’s marvellously suggestive term for substance) upon whose illusory presence the other elements in his argument (substance, understanding) lean and depend upon for their own identity. The phenomenality of these elements, in turn, supports empiricism’s doctrine of the continuity of perception and knowledge. In suggesting, however, the manner in which the phenomenality of language is an effect of a series of effacements and repressions of a non-cognitive material dimension, it becomes apparent that Locke’s text is also engaged in a struggle to preserve "the certainty of knowledge" from the forces of cognitive disintegration which the text itself releases.
PART TWO

Chapter Three

"Empty Sounds": Johnson's Dictionary and the Limit of Language

Saying occurs at the limit of language.

-- Georges Bataille

1. "Empty Sounds"

For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
To stir men's blood: I only speak right on;
I tell you that which you yourselves do know;
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me: but were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits, and put a tongue
In every wound of Caesar, that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.

-- Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, III,ii, 222-231.

... the point where psychoanalysis, linguistics, philosophy, literature, etc. meet and fail to meet...

-- Shoshana Felman, The Literary Speech Act

In their despondency, pathos, and exhaustion, the words with which Samuel Johnson closes the "Preface" to his monumental Dictionary of the English Language seem more the utterances of a character from the work of Samuel Beckett than those of a man
who has just finished a task which, in his own words, "no human powers have hitherto completed" (par. 94).¹ Like some forlorn Krapp, Johnson informs his readers of the "inconvenience," "distraction," the "sickness" and the "sorrow" which he endured in the nine years during which he laboured on the project, and of the "gloom of solitude" in which he now surveys the product of his toil and suffering (par. 94).² With such words, Johnson seems every bit the "drudge" he describes in his famous definition of lexicographer. Unsettling as such a tone may be, however, the "Preface's" haunting last sentence is more disturbing still, precisely because it impinges on our certitude of the efficacy of lexicography itself: "I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please, have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds: I therefore dismiss it with frigid tranquility, having little to fear or hope from censure or from praise" (par. 94). There is something vaguely disquieting in these noises: for one who defines his task as "tracing the original and detailing the signification of words" (Lexicographer) to name any words, particularly those which mark the felicitousness with which he executes his purpose, as "empty sounds" is for that writer to suggest something subtly hostile not only to the entire undertaking but also to the very notion of a dictionary and, indeed, to meaning itself. By Johnson's definition, a dictionary is "a book containing the words of any language in alphabetical order, with explanations of their meaning" (Dictionary). For such a work to employ a phrase, whether colloquially, hyperbolically, or even accidentally, which suggests, however remotely, that a meaningful sound such as "success" might be emptied of all sense, is for
that work to raise the shadowy but nonetheless disruptive possibility of a dimension of linguistic operation irreducible to notions of meaning, which exists apart from and in utter indifference to any human desire to signify, including the sort of desire which would lead one to use, or to write, a dictionary.

Here I should note that what follows in this and the next two chapters is not so much a thematic study of Johnson's *Plan and Dictionary* as it is a theoretical examination of the manner in which the dimension of linguistic negativity which exceeds "meaning" leaves its traces in the text and the relation of this excess to death, community, and ultimately, to labour. In a sense, what is said here concerning Johnson's *Dictionary* could be said of all dictionaries. And yet, by the same token, Johnson's texts are rich and intriguing for the manner in which the rhetoric of passages such as that quoted above complicate the phenomenal notion of language which linguistic historiographers commonly invoke and upon which they rely. Language in Johnson's work emerges as a highly unsettled category of knowledge, imbricated in complex ways with other categories the identity of which, such relationships reveal, are marked by a similar element of indeterminateness. The material excess which that indeterminateness marks is apparent in certain figures which Johnson employs at key moments in his text such as here where he raises the spectre of "empty sound."

What makes this phrase striking is the fact that in the one other instance in the "Preface" in which the figure of "empty sound" occurs, it does so, as in our first example, in the company of death. As part of a general discussion of the difficulty of
defining those words "of which the sense is too subtle and evanescent to be fixed in a paraphrase," Johnson cites the case of those words "which are by the grammarians termed expletives" (par. 44). Although such words "are easily perceived in living tongues to have power and emphasis, though it be sometimes such as no other form of expression can convey," in dead languages, Johnson writes, they "are suffered to pass for empty sounds of no other use than to fill a verse, or to modulate a period" (par. 44; emphasis added). Like the depletion of the meaning of the words "success" and "miscarriage" by the death of those whom Johnson says he wished his Dictionary to please, the "death" of a language drains some of its words of their meaning or, more suggestively, of their "power," leaving behind only the space occupied by the shell of their "empty sound."

But what precisely is an "empty sound," particularly an empty linguistic sound? What is the nature of the relationship which would seem to obtain between empty sound and death? And what are the consequences of this relationship for Johnson's Dictionary?

As Jacques Derrida argues in "Signature Event Context," the sign is only possible insofar as it may be repeated in the absence of its sender or receiver. The possibility of repetition, in other words, is a feature of the sign's structure, not some accident which befalls an essentially unrepeatable sign from without. Furthermore, because repeatability implies the possibility that the sign may operate in the absence or death of its sender or receiver, the sign must be similarly inscribed with the possibility of that absence and of that death. This "essential" absence or death which is inscribed as a structural possibility of the sign must be distinguished, however, from empirical absence or death, that is,
from the negation of presence or life which Derrida describes as a "distant presence" (7). Empirical absence and death -- our cognitive experience of the unrepresentable -- are effects of the primordial or "absolute" absence which (obtaining in the structural possibility of empirical absence which we have said is inscribed in the sign) necessarily precedes any determination of presence or absence as positive or negative expressions of presence. Non-self-identical and incommensurable with any notion of presence, "radical" death and "absolute" absence mark a disruption in any such determinate presence, regardless of whether the value of its identity is positive or negative. As Derrida explains, "the absence is not a continuous modification of presence, it is a rupture in presence, the 'death' or the possibility of the 'death' of the receiver inscribed in the structure of the mark" (8). In this sense, every language is always already a dead language, its signs necessarily inscribed with the possibility of their continued functioning in the absence or death "of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers" (7) or senders. Derrida's placement of "death" in quotation marks, moreover, points to the inadequacy of the word as a name for the ultimately unnameable rupture which it is invoked to designate. There could be no proper name for this break in presence for the rupture itself is the condition of possibility of naming and of meaning. What "death" shares with this rupture, however, is the attribute of marking the excess and thus the limit at which language and life -- thoroughly imbricated by virtue of their common liminal dimension -- "take place" and emerge as determinate phenomena, a horizon utterly inaccessible to cognition or to language.
It is in this respect that "death" is cognate with the notion of an "empty sound."

As an aspect of language which is absolutely rather than relatively insignificant (that is, which comes before any determination of the meaning or meaninglessness of a signifier, while at the same time making such distinctions possible), "empty sound," properly speaking, is part of neither the sensory nor the cognitive elements of the sign, both of which, as the sign's two faces, are inseparable from the notion of language as a strictly interpretable phenomenon. On the other hand, as the arbitrary union of utterance and meaning, the notion of the sign also "implies a moment in which the sign stands free of its significations" (Chase 96), a "space" in language which, although non-signifying in itself, marks the event of the coming-into-being of language as discourse, what David L. Clark has called "the very threshold across which language in its materiality passes into cognition and readability" ("Monstrosity" 271; emphasis added). We might say, after Émile Benveniste, that this liminal movement is that of "the very act of producing an uttered" but "not the text of the uttered" (qtd. in Agamben 25), providing we understand this passage in a non-subjective way. As that which marks the moment at which language -- apart from any signification -- takes place, "empty sound" is constitutive of language, but as such, like "death," it is necessarily beyond the reach of language's representational powers and thus beyond cognition: to represent this limit would require a capacity to reflect the conditions of the possibility of reflection, something which any reflection must necessarily efface. In this sense, the notion of an "empty sound," radically conceived, marks a dimension of linguistic operation inaccessible to language. But although it may
be inexpressible, this limit is nonetheless exposed in the oscillating movements we find between various cognate pairs of figures in Johnson's *Plan of a Dictionary* and in his "Preface" to the *Dictionary* itself. As we shall see, the theme of these movements is failure.

2. "To chace the sun": A Thematics of Failure

It is a critical commonplace that the *Dictionary* fails to realize the goals which Johnson had envisioned for it. Although the work remained "a standard in both method and content" (Sledd and Kolb 205) seventy years after its publication, this renown was (and is) accompanied by a sense that, along with its definitions, etymologies, and illustrative quotations, the *Dictionary* also offers a cautionary tale of talent overreaching itself. The source of this reading is often cited as the discrepancy in tone between Johnson's *Plan*, published in 1747, in which he sets out his scheme for his would-be patron, Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, and the "Preface" to the dictionary itself, which appeared eight years later in February 1755. For example, in *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography*, Sidney I. Landau notes that the *Plan* "was far too ambitious" (51). Murray Cohen claims that, in writing the *Dictionary*, Johnson was forced to submit "to a reduced achievement more in keeping with a disillusioned idea of language," the "Preface" marking a "descent from a romantic pursuit of perfection to the accurate mapping of current linguistic territory" (91). And, more recently, Allen Reddick, referring specifically to Johnson's thoughts on the problems of definition, notes
how, with the "Preface," "the confidence and youthful assurance of the Plan is replaced by apology and defensiveness towards those who expect what cannot be performed" (50).

The perception that the Dictionary falls short of the lexicographer's original desires is, however, seldom based on a rigorous, point-by-point comparison of the two texts but rather on various comments Johnson himself makes in the "Preface" where he reflects openly and at length on his failure to execute what he describes as his encyclopedic design in its entirety. For example, in one particularly striking and often-quoted passage, Johnson recalls:

When first I engaged in this work, I resolved to leave neither words nor things unexamined, and pleased myself with a prospect of the hours which I should revel away in feasts of literature, the obscure recesses of northern learning, which I should enter and ransack, the treasures with which I expected every search into those neglected mines to reward my labour, and the triumph with which I should display my acquisitions to mankind. When I had thus enquired into the original of words, I resolved to show likewise my attention to things; to pierce deep into every science, to enquire the nature of every substance of which I inserted the name, to limit every idea by a definition strictly logical, and exhibit every production or art or nature in an accurate description, that my book might be in place of all other dictionaries whether appellative or technical. But these were the dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer. (par. 72)

The world to which the lexicographer wakes is, curiously, one in which his desire to realize the totalizing dreams of the poet is blocked by the limitless nature of the task before him. Thus, he tells us he was forced to "set limits" to his work (par. 73), relinquishing the dream of comprehensivity and accepting that "to pursue perfection, was, like the first inhabitants of Arcadia, to chace the sun, which, when they had reached the
hill where he seemed to rest, was still beheld at the same distance from them (par 72). Johnson clearly makes no effort to disguise what he explicitly refers to as the "failures" of his Dictionary. What he does do, however, is gently remind the reader that any such shortcomings must be measured against the magnitude and difficulty of the task which was attempted. "These failures," he writes,

however frequent, may admit extenuation and apology. To have attempted much is always laudable, even when the enterprize is above the strength that undertakes it: To rest below his aim is incident to every one whose fancy is active, and whose views are comprehensive; nor is any man satisfied with himself because he has done much, but because he can conceive little (par. 72).

Or, as he more forthrightly states it in his concluding paragraph, "I have only failed in an attempt which no human powers have hitherto completed" (142).

Critics are often quick to agree with Johnson's assessment of the Dictionary's failure, seeing in the history of the text's production (or at least in the "Preface's" representation of that history) a sort of morality tale consistent with the thematics of vanity which characterize Johnson's work in general. Viewed in this way, the Dictionary fails because Johnson is unable to fulfil the dream of linguistic totalization by which, as an "enthusiastic novice" (Weinbrot 79), he had once, presumably, been motivated. The problem with such readings, however, is that they make undue concessions to the "Preface's" interpretation of the writing of the Dictionary, conflating that text's reading of the past with what is actually set down in the Plan. In reading the Plan through the
"Preface," such critics tend to overlook and obscure the degree to which the theme of failure is actually inscribed, *in advance*, in the *Plan* itself.

To be sure, failure manifests itself less resolutely in the *Plan* than it does in the "Preface": the failure which the later text views in hindsight can only be anticipated in the *Plan* and, as such, the intimations of miscarriage which we find there are generally overshadowed by the expressions of hope and desire for success which are its counterparts. And although critics may read these expressions as signs of "youthful assurance," they do so ultimately only by ignoring the apprehension of failure by which such utterances are invariably accompanied. It may be that such critics are victims of what might be called the "failure effect" which Johnson creates for the *Plan* with the "Preface": in its representation of the history of the dictionary, the "Preface" elides the cautious tone with which Johnson advances many of his initial proposals (indeed, it never explicitly mentions the *Plan* at all), creating that effect of naive certitude which critics have subsequently attributed to the *Plan*. It is in the "Preface," for example, and not the *Plan* that we read for the first time of Johnson's encyclopedic desire "to leave neither words nor things unexamined" (par. 72). But, despite the claims of critics, there is little of such out and out lexicographical hubris apparent in the *Plan*. Any exuberance with which Johnson expresses his desires there is invariably moderated by admissions of the difficulty or impossibility of bringing those wishes to fruition. For example, while Johnson, outlining his plan for Chesterfield, may declare with one breath, "Thus, my Lord, will our language be laid down, distinct in its minutest subdivisions, and resolved
into its elemental principles," he will also, with the next, lament "who upon this survey can forbear to wish that these fundamental atoms of our speech" which he would wish to discover, do not "obtain the firmness and immutability of the primogenial and constituent particules of matter" (18) which would guarantee the success of his project. Much of what Johnson proposes in the Plan is proposed tentatively, like this, in the mode of a desire rather than a certainty. Nor is this a characteristic which is exhausted by the writing of the Dictionary: it lingers, as we have seen, to the last paragraph of the "Preface" and Johnson's recollection of those, now dead, who he "wished" his book "to please." Although Johnson's desires in the Plan may be ambitious, they are never offered as anything more (or less) than desires, and certainly never as promises, at least promises of totalization.

Diversion 1: Promises

And yet, despite the wariness with which it treats its own propositions, the Plan does take the form of a promise of sorts—a contract—and, as such exposes a dimension of language cognate with desire. "Addressed to the Right Honourable Philip Dormer, Earl of Chesterfield," and signed by "Your Lordship's Most Obedient and Most Humble Servant, SAM. JOHNSON" (34), the Plan is implicitly offered as one half of a contractual agreement between the lexicographer and the Lord whose patronage he is seeking to attract and secure; that is, it is offered as a promise. As Shoshana Felman has noted, speech act theorists typically take the promise as an exemplary model of the
performative, that category of utterance which, in its enunciation actually accomplishes an act as opposed to merely describing some state of affairs. The performative constitutes an event which takes place in the moment in which it is uttered and which refers to nothing beyond the event of its own coming into being. This is not to say that the promise is without consequences. Promises, as Ian Balfour has observed, have "nothing but consequences -- but ones that are unpredictable" (8). Unpredictability arises because, as a speech act, the promise functions independently not only of the speaker's intentions but also of the cognitive content of the promise itself, that is, from that which is promised. As a radically independent event, the promise intervenes in the very future it would seem to anticipate. In doing so, it exposes a dimension of language which Shoshana Felman has described as "always, irreducibly, in excess over its statement" (77), an aspect of language which obtains beyond representation, as the limit which marks the space in which language as meaningful discourse arises. And the moment of the emergence of language is also that of the intervention which the promise exposes.

"Promising," Derrida maintains, "is inevitable as soon as we open our mouths" (Mémoires 98). To open one's mouth (to "say") is to initiate a movement which opens and puts into circulation the space (and trace) of difference necessary for the referential or cognitive function of language (the "said") to emerge, which it does only with the imposition of form upon the incoherent blankness of the inaugural breach of presence, that is, on that which exceeds description (but also perception and knowledge) (Clark 280). Utterly incommensurable with one another, these two functions are also
indissociable for, as Cynthia Chase writes in her summary of one of de Man's most important insights, while "the sensory component of the sign implies a moment in which the sign stands free of its significations," the sign also "exists only insofar as it signifies, enters into a determinate relationship or system of relationships" (96). To "open our mouths," therefore, is to broach this impossible separation and thus to promise the possibility of meaning. "Before language means," Balfour writes, "language promises meaning" (17). But only promises it, never delivering or even promising to deliver. As an event, utterance intervenes in "language" in such a way so as to create the conditions necessary for meaningful discourse to emerge. This intervention, however, occurs apart from any "intention" to mean, or any meaning inherent in utterance itself. The promise is utterly indifferent to the "promised" which arises only as a consequence of the space of language which utterance opens. Turning its back on the promise (or utterance) and thus effacing the heterogeneous and indeterminate space of difference which promising opens in presence, meaning takes its place. By the same token, however, meaning can never be anything but promised: we cannot "hold" utterance to its promise of meaning -- there is no-thing to hold. The promise is merely the necessarily hollow gesture which is the inaugural condition of possibility of meaning and which meaning, in order to take place as such, must obliterate. To paraphrase one of de Man's most crucial formulations, we might say that language promises and language means, but language cannot promise meaning: it can only reiterate it as the effacement of its own impossibility.9 Meaning, this suggests, cannot be experienced in its fullness, but only as the repression of a lack,
which is to say, as desire. To promise (meaning) is to arouse desire: the promise opens a space of difference which, in the lack it exposes, is experienced as a desire which must be repressed if meaning is to emerge. We might say, after Lacan, that to say something is to say that something has been irretrievably lost or irreparably broken. Meaningful discourse thus emerges as the near side of an effaced or repressed desire for the presence of a "pure promise" (Derrida, Mémoires 98), the desire "itself," and adumbrates a limit of language which the Dictionary repeatedly confronts, exposes, and turns from.

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As Johnson suggests toward the end of the Plan, desire is somehow intrinsic to the project itself. In drawing his address to Chesterfield to a close, he writes

This, my Lord, is my idea of an English dictionary, a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened. And though, perhaps, to correct the language of nations by books of grammar, and amend their manners by discourses of morality, may be tasks equally difficult; yet as it is unavoidable to wish, it is natural likewise to hope, that your Lordship's patronage may not be wholly lost. (32)

No less fundamental to the project than wishing, however, (or to language itself, as we shall see) is the anticipation of the possibility of disappointment and failure which accompanies the expression of every such wish in the Dictionary. For example, in the Plan, Johnson proposes to illustrate each word with a series of quotations, chronologically arrayed so that "every word will have its history, and the reader will be informed of the gradual changes of the language, and have before his eyes the rise of some words, and
the fall of others" (32). No sooner does he propose this ambitious scheme, however, than Johnson undercuts the expectations it raises by acknowledging the difficulties involved in its realization, admitting that "Observations so minute and accurate are to be desired rather than expected, and if use be carefully supplied, curiosity must sometimes bear its disappointments" (32).

The disappointment which marks the "Preface" is thus at least anticipated to some degree as the dark side of the bright hopes which light the Plan. Johnson goes so far as to say that the object of the Plan is not "to raise expectation, but to repress it" (4). Failure, in other words, is not something which diverts the project's progress towards perfection as Johnson suggests in the "Preface," but rather is inscribed in the work from the start, possibly even as a function of the structure of the field to be described. The notion of such a radical failure is particularly apparent in one passage from the Plan in which Johnson implicitly mocks the notion of a "perfect" dictionary. The instance occurs in the section of the text on "Interpretation" (that is, on the explanation of the meaning of terms, or definition). Johnson notes the need to distinguish a word's "strict and critical meaning" from "that which is loose and popular" (25) and cites as his example the case of the word "perfection," which, he writes,

though in its philosophical and exact sense, it can be of little use among human beings, is often so much degraded from its original signification, that the academicians have inserted in their work the perfection of a language, and with a little more licentiousness might have prevailed on themselves to have added the perfection of a dictionary. (24 - 5)
Clearly, we are to expect nothing "complete; consummate; finished; neither defective nor redundant" (to use Johnson's first definition of "Perfect") from the Dictionary. Furthermore, in mocking in a single sentence the possibilities of both a perfect language and a perfect dictionary, this passage suggests that any imperfections in his (or any) dictionary are coextensive with those of language itself. This is to imply that every dictionary is necessarily imperfect, if by imperfect we mean incomplete. Such a thought, however, contradicts Johnson's declaration stated earlier in the Plan that the "one great end of this undertaking is to fix the English language" (11). If every dictionary and with it all language is always already imperfect, Johnson's Dictionary cannot be viewed exclusively as an attempt to fix, complete, or "perfect" language: to hope to realize such a goal, Johnson's comments suggest, is absurd. As I hope to demonstrate, Johnson's attempt to complete and perfect language is heuristic and, as such, inscribed in advance with the possibility of failure. What is of particular interest to me here is the manner in which the various strategies Johnson employs for determining a positive basis for fixing the language expose the contours and limits of language's imperfectability and as such, yield a sort of linguistic knowledge which is neither positive nor negative but rather constitutive of either possibility and their difference.

Despite the problems such passages as the one quoted above raise for the notion that "perfection" was anything but a conceit or hallucination necessary for the production of the Dictionary, critics rarely, as I have said, comment upon the profuse and suggestive manner in which failure is inscribed in Johnson's project from the outset. While doing
so allows them to make certain claims about the *Dictionary* (and, by implication, about language, thus exposing the manner in which their readings of Johnson's text are defined by their own conception of language), it also forecloses the possibility that failure could be in any way constitutive of the dictionary or language. If, however, we take the position that failure is essential to the project and, by extension, to language, the rhetorical manifestations of "failure" in the *Plan* and "Preface," or more precisely, the oscillations between expectation and failure, desire and disappointment which characterize those texts, may be seen as a sort of *via negativa* toward language which, it becomes increasingly apparent, is not one object of knowledge among others but rather the very grounds or condition of possibility of knowledge; the opening exposed in these oscillations, as we shall see, marks an excessive dimension which is beyond language's capacity to represent but where language as such comes into being.

Pairs of oscillating figures may be found throughout the *Plan* and "Preface." One example, which might stand as an emblem of the polarities and tensions which inform and disrupt the *Dictionary*, occurs early in the *Plan* when Johnson describes for Chesterfield the hazards posed by associating the name of one so well-renowned for his authority in linguistic matters as the Earl with the project. Of the apparent interest Chesterfield had shown toward the dictionary, Johnson comments

> How far this unexpected distinction can be rated among the happy incidents of life, I am not yet able to determine. Its first effect has been to make me anxious lest it should fix the attention of the public too much upon me, and as it once happened to an epic poet of France, by raising the reputation of the attempt, obstruct the reception of the work. I imagine
what the world will expect from a scheme, prosecuted under your Lordship's influence, and I know that expectation, when her wings are once expanded, easily reaches heights which performance never will attain, and when she has mounted the summit of perfection, derides her follower, who dies in the pursuit. (3)

In this image, sphinx-like expectation laughs contemptuously down as human, all too human performance struggles up the rock face towards her perch atop the peak of perfection. In the space between them lies the killing zone, the limit where performance fails or "dies" in its attempt to match expectation. If, however, we pursue the logic of this allegory, it becomes apparent that death marks not only the end of performance but that of expectation as well, at least in this particular instance: expectation can exist only in relation to the possibility that it might be satisfied by performance. And in marking a limit to both performance and expectation, death opens a space in which what I will call "the work" -- in this case, the Dictionary, flawed as it is -- comes into being. The event in which the work comes into being is thus cognate with a disruption of expectation or desire by death, that is, by an event which is death-like in its sheer accidentality and resistance to understanding. The space hollowed out by this failure is the condition of possibility of the work's coming into being. This is to say: the work succeeds only insofar as it fails.

And this failure is not "once" but rather multiple and relentless. Constitutive of the work, it is inscribed in the text not in any way which might give itself to us so that it might be known in "itself," but rather in a way which, like the unconscious, can only be inferred by certain effects it produces, in this case, textual disturbances. With the
Plan and the "Preface" to the Dictionary, this unrepresentable excess is "exposed" in the oscillation which occurs between figures of totalization, such as perfection or desire, and figures of rupture, such as failure or death. Together, such pairs of figures mark the poles of the text's operation, opening in their reciprocal movements the space in which the Dictionary and (less licentiously) language take (their) place.

The scenario described in the allegory above would be unremarkable, perhaps, if it were not repeated over and over again in the Plan and the "Preface." Although different figures may play "expectation" and "performance," all of these submit to the same oscillating pattern which I have described. Together, they may be subsumed under the general categories of desire and death. For example, in the closing passage of the "Preface," the lexicographer's desire to please a particular group of people with his dictionary is interrupted by their deaths, an event which renders the words "success" and "miscarriage" "empty sounds." Death here, it should be noted, does not intrude upon any determinate or present fullness which these words might already possess. "Success" and "miscarriage" are the positive and negative expressions of a "wish to please," that is, of a desire, thus of a sense of lack which, so it is imagined, will only be fulfilled when a pronouncement of one or the other is passed upon the dictionary by those whom it was intended to please. Until that moment, those words, and with them the meaningfulness of all the words in the Dictionary remain suspended in anticipation of their fulfilment. When death disrupts that possibility, however, desire's dream of meaningfulness is dispersed, leaving only the inscrutable blankness of "empty sound."
And yet, this analysis of language, and the "description" of the brink at which language takes place, ultimately succeeds (like the earlier description of the work itself) only insofar as it fails. Death and desire are not literal players in this scenario but rather figures for the two incommensurable aspects of the signifying process in whose imbricated relationship the limit of language lies. Death, for example, could not be said to interrupt desire from "without": desire is desire only insofar as it may be interrupted or disappointed. The possibility of interruption, here figured as death, is thus always already inscribed in desire as its condition of possibility. Accordingly, language, conceived as a desire for meaning, is necessarily and fundamentally "interrupted," or split, and thus rendered non-self-identical by the imageless and primordial act which that desire marks and which, in its sheer resistance to human understanding, is cognate with our negative "knowledge" of death. "Death," of course, is not the proper name for this disruption: it is "successful" as a figure for the limit at which language takes place only insofar as it fails to represent that limit.¹² This failure, which is at once catastrophic but essential to language's emergence as discourse, occurs because, in order to function as a sign, the figure of "death" necessarily effaces the blankness of that opening in presence (and desire) which is the condition of possibility of language which it would represent. This effacement, moreover, is possible only because, as a figure, "death" is itself the expression of a desire to totalize and thus to turn away from that disruptive element of language which is language's condition of possibility.
In the oscillations between "death" and "desire" which are apparent in Johnson's text, we thus glimpse a scene like that "chasm, sightless and drear," which Shelley describes in his sonnet "Lift not the painted veil", over which "Fear / And Hope, twin Destinies . . . ever weave / Their shadows" (ll. 4-6). Meaning occurs only when this incomprehensible space, opened in presence with the event of utterance, is erased, which it is in this case by the desire for fullness expressed in the figure of death, that is, by a figure for the inscrutability of the opening. But, because desire can only signify a lack, "meaning," like the shadows over the chasm, can never fully obliterate the absolute "emptiness" -- the "empty sounds" -- of language, which will thus always retain a capacity to disrupt any intent to mean or pretension to mastery produced in language.

Among the more extravagant gestures of mastery we find are those which occur when language seeks to represent itself. A dictionary is one example of such a desire, a preface is another. David L. Clark has observed that "ordinarily prefaces are the place where the writer indulges in the fantasy that one is the master of one's own text" ("Monstrosity" 263). With the "Preface" to Johnson's Dictionary, however, that fantasy is undone by the imageless fact of death. Stranded between a dream of the word as fully meaningful (the desire which critics tend to associate with the Plan and which Johnson constructs as his original hope for the dictionary) and the unfathomable, inhuman, and death-like disruption which forbids the realization of that dream, the "Preface" and with it the Plan, expose in their failure the opening in which we have said language takes place.
"Unspeakable and ungraspable in itself" (Agamben 77), this space is characterized neither by presence nor absence, fullness nor emptiness, sound nor silence, signification nor meaninglessness (at least, meaninglessness understood as a simple negation of meaning rather than a radical indifference to it) but rather by a shuttling between these extremes. Opened by virtue of the incommensurability of meaning with the material conditions which make meaning possible, this unintelligible space of language must be effaced by the imposition of form upon its absolute blankness for meaningful discourse to take place. But between the breaching and the blotting out of the inaugural opening of language there occurs a pivotal instant in which the apparent continuity of utterance and signification is ruptured and the coherency of all determinate notions, including those of language and all that is cognate with it -- for example, history, the speaking subject, and community -- is suspended under a threat of dissolution. "Experienced in a mood of pathos and fear" (Clark 260) such as that which marks the "Preface," this flickering break in meaning shadows forth the dreary prospect of a dimension of language utterly indifferent to human intention or desire, belying even the minimal guarantee of the reliability of cognition "promised" by the apparently self-evident fact that linguistic signs are given to consciousness.

Fleetingly, an indeterminate hiatus is exposed and with it, the possibility that the intelligibility of the linguistic sign does not flow to us from its material component: rather, the disruption suggests that the sign's intelligibility occurs only by way of an imposition of form upon the inscrutable space of the primordial breaching of language.
"Meaning," in other words, is made, not found or intrinsic, its production consisting in a self-naturalizing gesture whereby it obliterates, at once, the arbitrariness of the act which brings it into being, and the fissure in presence upon which it is imposed. Meaning, we might say, is written in the open wound of language and this is the space in which Johnson's *Dictionary* is inscribed and which it exposes.

Like the wounds of Shakespeare's assassinated Caesar, this break in language flashes up before those confronted by its blank muteness -- its "empty sound" -- as both a menace and a chance. On the one hand, in its unresponsiveness to the human wish to make sense -- whether of Caesar's death or of the death-like accidentality of the coming-into-being of language -- this aperture threatens to consume all sense and order in chaos. On the other hand, in shielding itself from this dismembering force, sense projects a voice, like a ventriloquist or a dissembling orator upon that inarticulate caesura, thus seizing the authority which that position commands, although with a gesture which, because it seems the expression of those "dumb mouths," effaces the arbitrariness with which it does so, appearing only to tell "you that which you yourselves do know." Just as Marcus Antonius might "move / The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny" by putting "a tongue / In every wound of Caesar," so might Johnson -- or any one presuming to speak for language -- exercise a palpable influence over the political life of Augustan England by bidding language speak for him as he does with his *Dictionary*. Like the mute and lifeless body of Caesar, the negativity of language is a locus not just of meaning, but of history and power.
Nonetheless, Johnson is no Antony. Far from displaying the dead body of language for all to see, the dictionary repeatedly denies it has a corpse on its hands, effacing the incoherent blankness of language's materiality and thus animating its form through various elaborate rhetorical manoeuvres and diversions, foremost among which, as we shall see, are organic metaphors -- figures of life. But, driven by the unsatisfiable desire to confirm the positivity of language by discovering a motivated link between its sensory and conceptual components, such rhetoric inevitably and repeatedly confronts the unassimilable limit of language. Each time the wish for a fully-present meaning substance is run to the end of its rhetorical lead, it becomes apparent that the identity -- the voice -- which the Dictionary wishes to attribute to language is possible only as an effect of desire which can never hold death permanently at bay, although it may temporarily displace the disarticulating force in language which we have identified with death on to entities seemingly external to language, thus infusing language with vital signs. As the inexpressible condition of the possibility of language, that repressed element returns over and over again to disrupt whatever pretensions to linguistic knowledge and mastery desire may induce.

It is clear from the categories invoked and implicated in the various displacements which the text enacts that much is at stake in language's attempt to account for itself. In tracing the diversions of Johnson's rhetoric, it becomes apparent that the limit whose disruptive effects the text turns from in order to shield its own coherence is, in the Dictionary, a space not only of language but of history, community, and labour as well.
But, although this limit is common to all four (and others, no doubt), it is so only in the sense that what they share could never be described as an identity or something positive. What they have in common is difference. As with all concepts, language, history, community, and labour are nodes in an open-ended network of difference in which the meaning and identity of any single concept is never present to itself as such, but rather circulates through all the other elements in the system, returning to the concept in question only as a reference to that which it is not. Every concept is thus always already divided from itself by the inscription within it of its difference from every other concept. What every concept has in common with every other concept, in other words, is not anything which could be said to possess a determinate identity -- all such positive values are effects rather than elements of the system. What the concepts share, therefore, is the fact that each is nothing more than the sum of its differences from the other terms, a sum, it should be clear, which could never add up to a positive value, which could never amount to any thing. It is this common lack of identity which marks the non-ground of language, history, community, and labour which we have identified as the "limit," the erasure of which is necessary if any of these is to emerge as a determinate concept.

Johnson's *Dictionary* takes place (and takes its place) in a space between the inscription and erasure of this limit. For the most part, this space is exposed in the text's oscillation between a wish for linguistic presence or "perfection" and the death-like limit which ultimately confronts any performance which seeks to realize such a desire. Furthermore, because this limit is a locus common to and constitutive of all concepts, the
text traverses it from other angles as well: between meaning and its unintelligible material conditions, to be sure, but also between history and event, between community and the experience of its members, between commodities (such as dictionaries) and the labour involved in their production. In these movements, which I have generalized as a shuttling between desire and death, the Dictionary adumbrates the operations (but not the substance) of a realm of negativity, the erasure of which allows language, history, community, and labour to stand forth as determinate and intuitable phenomena which may thus become objects of cognition. We will eventually examine the play of each of these pairs in the Dictionary, but before doing so it is necessary to clear the ground, as it were, and consider a problem which critics of Johnson's dictionary (like many of those who write on matters of linguistic history) assimilate with an ease which is not apparent in the dictionary itself: the question of the possibility of theorizing language.

3. The Failure of Theory / The Theory of Failure

The operations of the dimension of language effaced in the reflex of figuration are most apparent, perhaps, in the failure of language to offer an adequate account of its operations, that is, through a failure of theory. That this failure is essential and necessary, not accidental, is precisely the point which critics of the Dictionary overlook as they seek to locate its failure in a place external to language. Furthermore, the disruptive potential of the limit we have described is not restricted to Johnson’s text: it is repeated in the critical commentary upon it, commentary which assumes a more
determinate notion of language than anything which is demonstrated in the Dictionary. For example, critical arguments seeking to establish the "theory of language" on which the Dictionary is based are inevitably undone by the text in which evidence of that theory is sought, and become caught up in the same displacements, diversions, elisions, and obfuscation as those which we find in the Dictionary itself. The most noteworthy difference is that the critical texts rarely bear the intimations of crisis and fatality which we find in Johnson's Plan, his "Preface," and the Dictionary itself.

There is, not surprisingly, fairly widespread critical consensus that, although Samuel Johnson makes no systematic statement concerning the "philosophy of language" which informs his Dictionary, he does, in both the Plan and the "Preface," echo a number of linguistic notions, primarily Lockean, which were current in his day. Critics variously discern the shape of these ideas in statements Johnson makes in the two texts, in the terms he selects to include in the Dictionary, in his method of defining those terms, and in the quotations he chooses to illustrate his definitions. But although such scholarship may tell us something of the intellectual context in which the Dictionary was produced, this knowledge does not offer a positive or exhaustive basis for understanding the specificity of the Dictionary itself. To the extent that both the Dictionary and any theoretical "sources" to which it may be said to make reference and whose ideas it may repeat are not merely constative statements about language but also rhetorical events produced in language, both bear traces of that "other," unrepresentable dimension of language which is the condition of possibility of the constative but which also exceeds and
confounds its pretensions to knowledge: neither theory nor language can turn around fast enough to reflect the locus of their own coming into being. This excess precludes the possibility that theory could ever offer an adequate account and thus a positive foundation for the particular configuration of the Dictionary’s own confrontation with the limit which makes possible its own coming-into-being.

To suggest, however, that such tensions between the theory and rhetoric of the Dictionary go completely unnoticed by critics would be as misleading as saying that these tensions do not exist. Tensions are acknowledged in the critical works, not in the form of statements, however, but in the traces of a process whereby such works preserve their own claim to truth and authority by displacing the aberrant and ungraspable element of language apparent in the rhetorical dimensions of the texts in question onto some other, putatively extra-linguistic entity. This gesture effaces the negativity which such disruptions suggest is coextensive with language by attributing them to an entity or entities deemed external to language. Ensnconed in the phenomenality of things, this negativity then "returns" to language, inflicting itself upon it from the outside as one determinate entity upon another. In imposing this capacity for linguistic disruption onto something foreign to language, criticism produces the hallucination of linguistic determinateness on which its own claims to truth and knowledge rest.

We find an example of this process in Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary: Essays in the Biography of a Book, published in 1955. In one brief section of this work, James H. Sledd and Gwin J. Kolb offer an outline of Johnson’s theories of language based on
various statements he makes in the Plan and the "Preface." Emphasizing that none of these ideas is original to Johnson, the critics describe a theory in which language is human in provenance, conventional and arbitrary in operation, and cyclical in development. Sledd and Kolb are quick to observe, however, that any summary which grants Johnson's disparate comments on the nature and function of language the appearance of a thoroughgoing whole is bound to be "more complete and more systematic than any single statement which Johnson ever made about language" (28). In fact, they warn, such all-encompassing schemes, "may perhaps impose" on Johnson's "disconnected remarks an order which he never intended" (28; emphasis added). The Dictionary was a "bookseller's project" designed to give the "age what it demanded" (4); as such, it challenged its users with no original theory of language but offered only a masterful synthesis of "theories which many writers had expressed before . . ." (26). Therefore, although Johnson's "theory of language" may bear an aspect of bricolage, it is theory nonetheless and in it Sledd and Kolb find explanations for a number of the Dictionary's features. For example, they argue that in the distinction Johnson draws between those "spots of barbarity impressed so deep in the English language, that criticism can never wash them away" ("Preface" par. 11) and those inflicted upon it through "accident" or "ignorance" (par. 11), one may detect the source of the importance Johnson ascribes to etymology as a means of determining the proper spelling and signification of words (par. 19). Similarly, in the Dictionary's cyclical theory of language development one may find the basis for Johnson's desire to fix language: if language is organic, change (which as
Sledd and Kolb note "is often 'corruption') is obviously bad for it leads ultimately to decline; therefore, anything which palliates such deterioration is good (Sledd and Kolb 27).

Sledd and Kolb's notes on Johnson's "isolated" (28) theoretical remarks are perceptive, particularly their description of the paradox which greets anyone who seeks to determine the "theory of language" informing the Dictionary: "Any noteworthy originality in Johnson's theory of language must lie in his system as a whole, not in its elements; and he made no systematic statement" (29). But astute as such a comment may be, it also implies that, regardless of their lack of originality or the fragmentary manner in which they manifest themselves, such theoretical ideas nonetheless constitute a positive basis for the Dictionary as well as for our understanding of it. Sledd and Kolb thus suggest a schematic relationship between theory and performance, but, in so doing, impose an order of their own which clears language of any responsibility for its failure to offer an adequate explanation of its operations. By the logic of this order, the fragmentary nature of the theory of language in the Dictionary is attributed not to any structural necessity of language -- such a move would place every theoretical gesture, including the theoretical project of explication which Sledd and Kolb venture in their reading of Johnson, under a threat of cognitive dissolution -- but rather, is heaped upon that convenient scapegoat of language breakdown, authorial intention: Johnson, we are told, had no intention of offering a coherent theory of language in his Dictionary. It was a "bookseller's project" designed to meet the needs and demands of the public.
Intention, however, functions in this particular textual economy as the conduit by which that element which necessarily disrupts the coherency of "theory" and of language is evacuated from both and passed to their "exterior," that is, to the realm of the dictionary's audience. Johnson's project was conceived to satisfy a public need. As such, Sledd and Kolb argue that "Johnson, as lexicographer asked no questions, gave no answers, and invented no techniques which were new to Europe, though they may very well have been new to English lexicography" (4). The intention of the lexicographer, in other words, was to give the audience that with which they were familiar, that which they expected. In ascribing the fragmentation of the Dictionary's theorization of language to a source which they determine external to language -- expectation -- Sledd and Kolb construct language as that which may be broken in upon and thus as a self-identical entity. By the same token, however, the source of this disruption must also possess the determinacy which would allow it to act as the "other" of language, conceived in terms of presence. And yet, for all of this, that external other bears an uncanny resemblance to that which it supposedly invades. Sledd and Kolb blame the theoretical incoherence of the Dictionary on Johnson's intention to give the age what it "demanded," that is, to place before his readers no more than the commonplaces of linguistic thought those readers would expect to find reproduced in such a work. Any disjunction or deficiencies in Johnson's scattered theoretical remarks arise, therefore, from the work's larger purpose of satisfying the desires of its audience, that is, from the inscription of the audience's desires in the design of the dictionary. There can be little doubt that market
considerations determined much of what we find in the *Dictionary*; this fact alone, however, does not automatically imply that without such interference Johnson would have based his dictionary on a more rigorously conceived, more complete theory of language, as Sledd and Kolb's explanation implies, or that such a theory is possible. In suggesting the possibility of a theory of language unviolated by the disfigurations of desire, Sledd and Kolb overlook two things. First, they neglect to consider the fundamental relationship which obtains between theory and desire and thus assume as self-evident that which we are perhaps more habituated to accept than properly know to be certain -- the possibility that any theory of language could form the positive basis for a text. Second, and of more immediate interest to us now, they elide the thoroughly overdetermined manner in which desire functions in the *Dictionary*.

4. Desire and the *Dictionary*: The Vanity of In-human Wishes

That Johnson's *Dictionary* is informed by the expectations or desires of others is apparent from the final sentence of the "Preface" with which I opened this discussion: in that passage Johnson tells us that there was a certain group of people, now dead, whom he "wished" his dictionary "to please," that is, a group of people whose particular desires he hoped his work would satisfy. But although the expectations of the *Dictionary*’s prospective audience play an important role in determining its shape and content, these readers are not the only ones whose wishes are inscribed in the work. What the *Dictionary* suggests, in fact, is that it is not possible to separate such desires from the
theory or practice of language, or, for that matter, from language "itself." In one way or another, desire informs the *Dictionary* at every juncture, ultimately manifesting itself not as something external to language but rather as coextensive with it. Language, the *Dictionary* tells us in its negative way, *is* desire.

In the *Plan*, expectation weaves a complicated pattern through audience, patron, lexicographer, and ultimately critic, intersecting most conspicuously in certain exemplary self-reflexive words, the definitions of which it seems are difficult to establish in terms other than those of desire. Far from representing something extrinsic to language, the *Dictionary* shows that the desire which Sledd and Kolb suggest contaminates and disrupts the theory on which it is based from without, is fundamental not only to Johnson's project but perhaps to language itself. From this perspective, the *Dictionary* embodies a desire to establish a basis for linguistic meaning in something other than desire and, as such, becomes a protracted meditation on the question of its own possibility.

Nowhere is the coincidence of desire and language more evident than in the first six paragraphs of the *Plan*. What emerges in these early pages is a relationship among lexicographer, patron, and audience in which each is bound to each in an economy of desire, the circulation of which, certain tensions in the text suggest, may be the strange essence of language itself. Addressed to Lord Chesterfield, the *Plan* would seem most obviously to inscribe the desires of Johnson's ultimately neglectful patron. Whatever precisely those desires may have been, Johnson casts them here in the deferential terms he says that, prior to planning his dictionary, he had reserved for those "princes and
statesmen" who, in their support of past lexicographical endeavours, "were thus solicitous for the perpetuity of the language" (3). But although the Plan actually does incorporate a number of Chesterfield's "beliefs or desires for the language and an English dictionary" (Reddick 19), particularly those relating to orthography, the possibility remains that Philip Dormer Stanhope’s name was invoked in the Plan for no other reason than to gild the preposterously ambitious project of a virtually unknown poet with the authority of a Lord reputed for his expertise in matters of language.\(^1\) Despite Johnson's protestations that it is his purpose in the Plan not "to raise expectation, but to repress it" (4), the inscription of the name "Chesterfield" in the text implicitly addresses and thus inscribes the expectations and desires of his wider audience.

But the function of desire in these texts is not limited to the influence which the patron or audience may exert over the dictionary: the lexicographer’s desires are obviously impressed there as well. Foremost among these is Johnson’s (as we have noted, somewhat ambivalent) wish to "fix the English language" (11). There is a sense, however, in the torsion which becomes apparent as Johnson seeks in various ways to realize this desire that it, along with those desires which we may trace to the dictionary’s patron and audience as well as to its critics, are displacements of an originary or absolute desire fundamental to language itself. Desire is experienced in language in meaning’s obliteraton of its own impossibility as presence: as the effacement of a lack desire thus marks the blank interval between the fullness language "wants" and the radical absence which language "is." Because this gap also marks the impossibility and absence of any
sort of stable, empirical presence or substance in language such as that which might be used to "fix" a language or preserve it from "decay," the Dictionary is constructed around a series of rhetorical patterns, the effect of which is to obviate the ubiquity with which desire permeates language. As repetitions of the originary desire to arrest and totalize language, however, i.e., as further effacements of an essential lack, these strategies invariably confront that limit of which desire is the near face and which we have associated with death and the taking place of language.

From its opening paragraphs, the Plan grapples with the uncanny possibility that desire may be indistinguishable from the production of linguistic meaning and thus from definition. This is apparent in the first two paragraphs in which Johnson recalls what his own notions of lexicography had been at the outset of his project:

When first I undertook to write an English Dictionary, I had no expectation of any higher patronage than that of the proprietors of the copy, nor prospect of any other advantage than the price of my labour; I knew, that the work in which I engaged is generally considered as drudgery for the blind, as the proper toil of artless industry, a task that requires neither the light of learning, nor the activity of genius, but may be successfully performed without any higher quality than that of bearing burthens with dull patience, and beating the track of the alphabet with sluggish resolution. (1; emphasis added)

Here, as if the actual nature of the task he was about to take up was inaccessible to him at the project's inception, Johnson extends his description of lexicography no further than an acquiescent recitation of those decidedly unappealing qualities with which he says it was "generally" associated. While it is obvious that someone cannot perfectly understand the rigours of a particular task until he or she has performed it, it is difficult to believe
that Johnson's conception of the nature of the work before him would be limited to the commonplaces of popular opinion. The Plan itself is proof against that for, as Sidney Landau points out, the sophistication of the text demonstrates that, "For someone who had never before compiled a dictionary, Johnson's grasp of the lexicographic problems he would be confronted with is extraordinary" (48). Nonetheless, Johnson creates the impression in the opening pages of the Plan that his knowledge of the job he is proposing to take on was determined not by any intimacy with the referent of the word "lexicography" itself, but rather by the popular perception of its meaning. And that understanding is not favourable: as Johnson portrays it, the general impression of lexicography in his day is of a dull task fit for none better than a literary Caliban. Furthermore, this perception, it seems, informs not only Johnson's notions of lexicography itself but also his expectations of the nature of the task before him. Addressing Chesterfield, he recalls

Yet on this province, my Lord, I enter'd with the pleasing hope, that as it was low, it likewise would be safe. I was drawn forward with the prospect of employment, which, tho' not splendid, would be useful, and which tho' it could not make my life envied, would keep it innocent, which would awaken no passion, engage me in no contention, nor throw in my way any temptation to disturb the quiet of others by censure, or my own by flattery. (2; emphasis added)

Johnson, in other words, would have his reader believe that he has based a decision which will preoccupy him in one way or another for much of the rest of his life not on any empirical knowledge of the nature of the work he is proposing to undertake but rather on something which, from the description he offers, sounds like little more than rumour
and hearsay. And yet, he is compelled to do so, at least according to the suggestion of his representation of the beginnings of the dictionary, because the actual nature of lexicography was unknowable to him before he began the work.

More disturbing than this, however, is the suggestion that the source of the "opinion" concerning the menial status of lexicography, and thus something which might provide a clue to its accuracy, is just as obscure and inaccessible as the actual nature of "lexicography" itself. Johnson writes

> Whether this opinion, so long transmitted and so widely propagated, had its beginning from truth and nature, or from accident and prejudice, whether it be decreed by the authority of reason, or the tyranny of ignorance, that of all the candidates for literary praise, the unhappy lexicographer holds the lowest place, neither vanity nor interest incited me to enquire. (2)

There are a number of possible explanations for the disparaging view of lexicography taken in these remarks, none of which are exclusive of the others. It may be, for example, as Sidney Landau suggests, that the comments were "contrived to enlist the sympathetic attention of Lord Chesterfield" (48). They may also be read, however, as an ironic commentary on the state of English lexicography as Johnson found it in the 1740s. Despite the progress "toward linguistic inclusiveness" and "real technicality of scientific information" (Wimsatt 21) which English lexicography had made in the hundred and fifty years which preceded the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary*, many English were still painfully aware that their language lacked the sort of authoritative and comprehensive standard which the French and Italian academies had established for their
own tongues and which was seen as necessary to preserve a language from decay. Desires for such a work for English had been expressed as early as the seventeenth century but, of the many dictionaries and grammars available in 1755, none could lay claim to the sort of comprehensive orthographic, grammatical, and lexicographical authority boasted by their Continental counterparts. So desperately was the need for such a standard felt at the time Johnson began his dictionary that William Warburton declared in 1747, "we have neither GRAMMAR nor DICTIONARY, neither Chart nor Compass, to guide us through this wide sea of Words" (qtd. in Sledd and Kolb 6). Indeed, to judge by its record of achievement, lexicography in England may well have been seen as the lot of the "blind," the "artless," and of those possessed of something less than genius, particularly when compared with the accomplishments of the French and Italians.

Johnson’s remarks demonstrate rather than merely describe the dire need for an authoritative dictionary such as the one which he here proposes to produce. In the absence of the sort of rigourous definition which one would expect a comprehensive lexicographical standard to provide, the meaning of "lexicography" is nothing more than the heterogeneous sum of the prejudices, opinions, and beliefs (indeed, the desires) which the public associates with the term. And these opinions are not without consequence: as the early paragraphs of the Plan demonstrate, they dictate what a speaker expects of that to which such words refer, thus informing the speaker’s relationship with the world and with those with whom he or she communicates. For example, six paragraphs later, Johnson describes the confused expectations raised by the variety of different ideas which
have become associated with another word fundamental to his endeavour, "dictionary": "The title which I prefix to my work has long conveyed a very miscellaneous idea, and they that take a dictionary into their hands have been accustomed to expect from it, a solution of almost every difficulty" (5; emphasis added). In the absence of the sort of stable notion of "dictionary" which an authoritative dictionary would be expected to provide, the user of a text with that word imprinted on its title page has no idea what to expect from such a book. The word "dictionary," in a manner similar to that of the word "lexicography," presents, therefore, the strange case of a sign failing (and thus falling victim to the vagaries of "opinion") because of an inadequacy on the part of its referent. Like the dictionary-user to whom he here refers, Johnson's expectations of the referent for the word "lexicography" are, in the absence of the sort of lexicographical standard which might offer him a stable notion of the "qualities and circumstances" ("Definition") characteristic of "lexicography," the product of what he would later describe in the "Preface" as a language "copious without order, and energetick without rules" (119), which, in its exuberant disorder, obscures and confounds the true nature of referents, permitting the sort of public confusion to which he himself, he suggests, was victim when first conceiving his idea for a dictionary.

Johnson's representation of the perplexity which arises when one is confronted with an excess of meaning such as that which accumulates around the word "lexicography" offers a dramatic demonstration of the problem the Dictionary proposes to address. Words, if not properly defined, the Plan suggests, are subject to the
disfigurations of "opinion," that "perswasion of the mind, without proof or certain knowledge" (Opinion) which the passages we have quoted suggest is related to the obtrusions of what Johnson, in his famous poem calls "the vanity of human wishes." In the play in meaning which arises if words such as "dictionary" or "lexicography" are inadequately defined, "that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life" (Rasselas 124) finds the opening it needs to interfere with our understanding and thus with our expectations of the world, while effacing with the same gesture the incommensurability of these expectations with the reality of the world.

But Johnson's text also demonstrates, albeit negatively, that it is difficult to lay the blame for such a failure of understanding strictly with the practice of lexicography. As we have seen, for such a failure to occur, its possibility must be inscribed in advance in the structure of the field being represented, that is, in language. The openness of words to the distortion of "opinion" and the interposition of "human wishes" suggests that language is already inscribed with the possibility of such disfiguration and thus by the lack of which desire is the mark. But whose desire? Can we be certain that these wishes, which apparently invade language from the outside, are entirely human? As we have seen, this inhuman element of language -- that dimension of language which cannot be reduced to categories of interpretability or intention -- has figured centrally in contemporary critical theory. In its various "failures," Johnson's text presents a possibility, consonant with these speculations, that the notion of the "human wish" is, in fact, a trope which substitutes an intelligibly human face for a dimension of language
which it is impossible to represent literally and which, in its utter indifference to human pretensions to knowledge, marks an aspect of language which we cannot even be sure is human. (If this is so, the "human" itself is an effect of the "suppression or covering over" [Warminski xxxii] of the inscrutability of linguistic desire.) The substitution of one desire -- "human wishes" -- for another, more radical, ostensibly linguistic desire which it is impossible to describe even negatively, constitutes what, in a cognate context, we have seen Andrzej Warminski call "a genuine forgetting, an arbitrary imposition like a catachrestic naming of that which has no name or like the substitution of meaning for marking" (xxxiii), or, we might say, the substitution of the intelligible for the unintelligible material conditions of its possibility.

Viewed from this angle, the Plan and the "Preface" appear as an exploration of the limits which this forgetting imposes. Together, the two texts mark this space (again, negatively) as part of an attempt to render that forgetting absolute (that is, positive) by assimilating any surplus of meaning a word may convey to the caprice of human desire. In other words, these texts seek to establish and preserve the determinateness of language, and thus the possibility that it may be known as a totality, by attributing its failure to a force deemed external to it. Furthermore, if language is a determinate phenomenon it must possess some positive element which would constitute the basis of its identity, a kernel which would be able to resist the incursions of human desire and which might thus constitute the basis for fixing the language. Although responsible for the shape and content of the Dictionary, the thought of such a positive linguistic element is ultimately
a consequence of the inaugural forgetting or effacement of that inhuman in-dimension of language adumbrated in the interruption of meaning by human wishes. As such, each gesture with which Johnson attempts to establish the presence of such an element and thus a solid basis for fixing language exposes, in its inevitable failure to exhaust the play of meaning, a limit which marks the edge of language as a human phenomenon. Johnson, we might say, attempts to account for the excess of meaning which language displays by circumscribing that surplus within the limits of the "human." In its failure to do so, his text reveals the excess as inexhaustible, incalculable, and unknowable precisely because it is that which marks the limit of the human and of human knowledge, that is, the space where both the human and language as intuitable phenomena come into being. Johnson's Dictionary confronts this inexorable limit at every turn, not as a substance but as the horizon of the impossibility of the text's dream of a language which is the source of its own origin, consequences, and identity. This limit marks the frontier where all such identities break down, where forgetting lifts at the edges, and where the vanity of wishes which are utterly in-human is exposed in all of its blank unintelligibility.

Before moving on, I would like to briefly retrace the shape this confrontation takes and consider its consequences. Generally, it should be clear that one object of Johnson's Dictionary is to bring the expectations which words generate about their referents into line with the "qualities and circumstances" (Definition) proper to those referents. Johnson implies this desire in the Plan when he claims "the chief intent" of his Dictionary is "to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom"
(4). To do so, however, he must, as I have said, establish a basis for meaning in a
dimension of language resistant to the workings of "human wishes." Echoing one of the
goals of the French Academy and the Accademia della Crusca (Sledd and Kolb 2),
Johnson suggests his desire for such a grounding element in his declaration that "one
great end" of his dictionary "is to fix the English language" (11), a desire he attempts to
realize by subsuming language under the determinate category of "the human." He does
so in two different, but related ways. In one case, Johnson identifies linguistic instability
with human imperfection; in the other, he draws a metaphorical link between language
and the living form of its users which then serves as the basis for an organic model of
language.

"It may be reasonably imagined," Johnson argues in the first instance, "that what
is so much in the power of men as language will very often be capriciously conducted"
(14). Circumscribing language within the bounds of that which is subject to "the power
of men," Johnson would appear to neutralize and naturalize all that is incomprehensible
in language, i.e. everything about language cognate with desire, by attributing those
things to human caprice. Joseph Priestley will draw a similar connection in his Lectures
on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar, but where he describes a reciprocity
between language and the spiritual and political life of humanity such that what is good
for one is good for the others, Johnson pursues the different implication -- which is
nevertheless the great hope of the dictionary -- that lexicographers and grammarians may
improve the language by devising systems which help make it impervious to the harmful influence of "human wishes."

But while placing the blame for the inconstancy of language at the feet of those who use it may offer reassuring confirmation of the apparently self-evident notion that language is coextensive with the human, it still does nothing to determine a means by which the language may be "fixed." Such a possibility might be realized, however, if language could be shown to possess a palpable, empirically-measurable material essence, resistant to the distorting effects of desire. In the Plan Johnson briefly considers the possibility as he describes his intentions of reducing language to its most basic elements:

Thus, my Lord, will our language be laid down, distinct in its minutest subdivisions, and resolved into its elemental principles. And who upon this survey can forbear to wish, that these fundamental atoms of our speech might obtain the firmness and immutability of the primogenial and constituent particles of matter, that they might retain their substance while they alter their appearance, and be varied and compounded, yet not destroyed. (18)

Although it is a possibility Johnson seems quick to dismiss as a bit of wishful thinking on his own part, his lexicographical method seems nonetheless informed by the thought of just such a linguistic prime matter. As this passage suggests, the scheme he proposes in the Plan involves the reduction of the physical aspects of language -- orthography, pronunciation, etymology, and analogy -- to their most fundamental elements. The same reductive method, however, when applied to the semantic element of language -- to meaning -- produces results which are far less certain, unsettling any residual hope that language is comprised of even trace elements of a determinate meaning-substance.
The problem of the nature of such an "elementary" building block of meaning arises with Johnson's recognition in the "Preface" that, although definitions should always consist of words less complex than the term they seek to explain, "the easiest word, whatever it be, can never be translated into one more easy" (par. 55). Definition by semantic reduction leads to a limit beyond which explanation and representation cannot pass. On the other side of this boundary, a different mode of cognition must be assumed to be in operation, a form of immediate semantic perception which Johnson identifies with intuition:

To explain, requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained, and such terms cannot always be found; for as nothing can be proved but by supposing something intuitively known, and evident without proof, so nothing can be defined but by the use of words too plain to admit a definition. (par. 43)

The problem, Johnson observes, demonstrating the repetition of Locke's thought in his text, lies with the fact that "simple ideas cannot be described" (par. 43). The semantic border inscribed by the names of simple ideas thus marks the limit of language's capacity to represent itself and its own meanings. Furthermore, because complex ideas are comprised of combinations of simple ideas, the terms which name those complex ideas are explicable only as far as the limit posed by their component simple ideas. That frontier where explanation fails therefore must not be construed as the edge of the semantic world over which the hapless lexicographer tumbles into a void of meaninglessness: language always and only functions on this edge, taking place along a ubiquitous limit which is coextensive with meaning, inscribed in all words, and present
in all utterances. The limit is language and the lexicographer is always already failing and falling over its edge.

Although this limit which explanation meets when language is reduced to its most basic semantic element is experienced as a form of resistance, its opposition to representation is unlike that which, for Aristotle, allows physical things "out there" to become objects of cognition (Godzich xiii). Rather, the resistance which the lexicographer encounters is that of something which, although it constitutes the basis of all meaning, is itself indefinable and indeterminate. In the passage cited above, Johnson suggests that the meaning of those words "too plain to be defined" which mark this limit may be known only through a process which he likens to intuition. In identifying the limit with intuition, the text attributes the stopping effect which those words "too plain to be defined" pose to analysis not to the presence of any meaning substance, but to the experience of meaning, specifically, the event of the direct apprehension of meaning by experience. In other words, in invoking intuition, Johnson shifts the basis for signification away from the possibility of the presence of a determinate meaning substance essentially constant and continuous over time, to that of the actual instant in which the signification of a particular word is experienced by the language user. The limit is thus cognate with the event, not the substance, of meaning.

As a basis for meaning, however, the event in which meaning takes place could hardly be said to possess the stability of a physical substance. Indeed, the resistance it offers is more consistent with an interruption of presence, like death, than with an
encounter with it: that is to say, its materiality is of a different order. In the "Preface," explaining why his definitions of some words fall short of the "whole power" of those terms, Johnson compares the event of the taking place of language to a disturbance which disfigures and obscures the view of the true meaning of those words: "it must be remembered, that while our language is yet living, and variable by the caprice of every one that speaks it, these words are hourly shifting their relations, and can no more be ascertained in a dictionary, than a grove, in the agitation of a storm, can be accurately delineated from its picture in the water" (par. 45). The figure is obviously a complex one but what should be noted in the context in which we are speaking is this: language here is described as "living," and the sign of that life is the storm which in this figure is identified with linguistic activity. The figurative association of the storm (along with its implication of resistance) with life (natural processes) inscribes the turbulent event of the taking place of language, along with "the caprice of every one that speaks it," in the comprehensive narrative of a determinate process to which is attributed the identity of an organic form. But, although this gesture confers the coherency which comes from being part of a determinate whole upon the chaotic instant of utterance in which words "shift their relations," filling those moments with the ballast of that presence which could not be ascertained at the atomic level of meaning, it also obviates the possibility that the agitation of the storm (and thus the resistance it offers to understanding) could be that of a radical and absolute breaching of presence, marking a caprice not human in provenance but (as was the case with "desire") fundamental to language itself. The rhetorical
connection drawn with this figure between the resistance which marks the taking place of language and the determinacy of the organic process in which that event takes place does not guarantee the immediate semantic stability of language. It does, however, respond to the overwhelming purpose of that desire for, in ascribing to diachronic or organic processes the linguistic presence he cannot locate through synchronic analysis, Johnson is able to offer the assurance that there is a method to the apparent madness of words.

5. Between Method and Madness

Technically correct rhetorical readings may be boring, monotonous, predictable and unpleasant, but they are irrefutable. They are also totalizing (and potentially totalitarian) for since the structures and functions they expose do not lead to the knowledge of an entity (such as language) but are an unreliable process of knowledge production that prevents all entities, including linguistic entities, from coming into discourse as such, they are indeed universals, consistently defective models of language’s impossibility to be a model of language.

-- Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory"

Despite such totalizing strategies as those discussed in the previous section, Johnson’s text suggests that language is a madness which will not be methodized. Attempts to systematize language such as those of the Renaissance language projectors often seem the work of men who are themselves slightly mad. But this is not strictly the fault of the subject struggling to make sense of language: while a method may be found in words (and indeed, must be found, if language is to be "readable"), that order will
always be inhabited by the sort of madness, or self-difference, which characterizes the incoherent disruption of the instant in which language takes place. Method is a totalizing expression of desire (or more specifically, of the repression of a desire), contrived to hold that madness at bay by representing its disturbances as reasonable. Insofar as anything we say must necessarily efface the disruption of presence which occurs with saying, and, moreover, that we cannot "say" (that is, represent) the event of saying "itself," anything we say about language will necessarily efface that unrepresentable breach in presence and order, that random and disconnected moment of madness which is the event of saying, or saying itself, distinct from what is said. By the same token, however, to the extent that method -- what is said about saying -- effaces or represses this aberrant dimension of language, it also inscribes, negatively, its madness within itself: madness is the phantom limb, the spectral other which continues to haunt not only the method of the Dictionary, but also that which is "discovered" in the Dictionary by its critics. It is in this way that, although Johnson may be able to discern an order to the madness of words, that order will harbour traces of the very madness it seeks to dispel. And that madness will invariably "return," disrupting whatever sense its erasure by method (the "said") permits. Method and madness thus might be said to constitute the two sides of the coin of language, but their relationship is not one of identity, as we would say of the head and tail of a dime. Language faces no such substance but rather is always "on edge," taking place in a relentless oscillating movement between two poles whose extremities are incommensurable with one another -- indeed, are repulsive to each other -- and which
here, this time, we call method and madness, but which elsewhere we call death and desire.

In the Plan, Johnson observes that the "great orthographical contest has long subsisted between etymology and pronunciation" (9), that is, between whether spelling should adhere to the manner in which words have traditionally been written, or conform to the way in which those words are currently spoken. Although Johnson offers no comment upon it, a similar opposition characterizes the Dictionary's treatment of meaning, the great semantic "contest" there obtaining between whether meaning is to be determined on the basis of etymology or usage and, by implication, whether language is to be conceived as a determinate phenomena -- a thing -- or as an event. The Dictionary thus enacts a struggle between the method of a notion of language which grounds meaning in origins and emphasizes semantic continuity and the madness of the disruption of that method by the discontinuous and random nature of the actual events of utterance which apparently comprise that organic whole. The struggle is evident in the Dictionary's inability to accommodate a notion of language based on the presence of the sort of fundamental meaning substance which would guarantee a modicum of semantic stability to the dynamic framework necessary to account for linguistic change.

Johnson finds order in language's madness in the notion of a linguistic life cycle which he describes in the "Preface": "Every language," he contends, "has a time of rudeness antecedent to perfection, as well as of false refinement and declension" (132). With this gesture, Johnson is able to inscribe any instance of a word's usage within the
determinate compass of the natural life span of the language to which it belongs, thereby palliati ng the disruptive effect of the heterogeneous event of utterance in which change occurs. Although individual instances of the word’s use may diverge or depart from its original meaning, each such instance is ultimately grounded in and thus motivated by the place it occupies in the determinate trajectory or history of the rise and fall of the language of which it thus forms an essential part.¹⁶

The desire to determine meaning by charting the progress of its mutations over time is particularly apparent in the emphasis Johnson places on continuity both in his definitions and in the quotations he uses to illustrate them. For example, in the Plan, he proposes that the quotations "be ranged according to the ages of their authors" (31). The effect of this method he suggests would be the lexicographical equivalent of time-lapse photography, a demonstration sure to delight the empirical mind of eighteenth-century England, although (as we have noted) Johnson is quick to admit his plan is more ambitious than its execution can realize. He writes

By this method every word will have its history, and the reader will be informed of the gradual changes of the language, and have before his eyes the rise of some words, and the fall of others. But observations so minute and accurate are to be desired rather than expected, and if use be carefully supplied, curiosity must sometimes bear its disappointments. (32)

In the "Preface" we find a similar emphasis on continuity although here it is expressed in the chronological arrangement of the definitions themselves. Again, Johnson concedes his desire to represent meaning in such an orderly, sequential fashion was "specious, but
not always practicable" (129), its execution frequently frustrated by a host of difficulties.

Nonetheless, continuity among definitions forms an ideal in the Dictionary:

In every word of extensive use, it was requisite to mark the progress of its meaning, and show by what gradations of intermediate sense it has passed from its primitive to its remote and accidental signification; so, that every foregoing explanation should tend to that which follows, and the series be regularly concatenated from the first notion to the last. (par. 49)

As is clear from this passage, the stress which Johnson lays on continuity necessarily involves an appeal to origins which, in the case of language, implies a reliance on etymology as the means of distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate terms and usages. In this appeal, however, it is also possible to discern a displacement of Johnson's frustrated search for a material substance at the atomic level of language, with the desire for origin standing in for the wish for substance, and the "primitive" signification of words replacing the elusive meaning "matter" as the fundamental element of semantic stability and, indeed, "truth." The two approaches to linguistic stability are similar in a number of respects. Etymology, for example, is characterized by the same reductive impulse we would expect to find at work in any search for the fundamental particles of meaning (and which we have said characterizes the Dictionary in general). The "primitive" word which constitutes the basic semantic unit is described in the "Preface" as that word

which can be traced no further to any English root; thus circumspect, circumvent, circumstance, delude, concave, and complicate, though compounds in the Latin, are to us primitives. Derivatives, are all those that can be referred to any word in English of greater simplicity. (par. 19)
Perhaps the most telling characteristic which the desire for a fundamental material element in language shares with the stress the *Dictionary* places on locating the etymons of words is suggested, however, by a passage from Johnson's "Preface" in which the capacity of a word to retain a stable meaning through time is described in terms of its "durability," that is, with a term which carries in its definition the sense of longevity (Johnson defines *Durableness* as "Power of lasting; continuance"), and in its etymology the notion of a substance ("*durabilis*, Latin," as Johnson's etymology for *Durable* notes). Johnson declares that "cant, which is always in a state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation" (137). Although we will return to the implications of this statement for matters of class, what we should note in the present (and cognate) context is the suggestion in this passage that a word's ability to endure through time may be taken as indirect evidence of the presence of something at least comparable to the meaning substance which would provide the lexicographer with the grounds necessary to fix a language.

Durability constitutes a key criterion for determining the legitimacy of words and deciding which should be included or "suffered to perish" in Johnson's *Dictionary*, which at this point comes to resemble a sort of linguistic lifeboat. The words condemned to be left out of the *Dictionary* are those which, unlike the "durable materials of language" (par. 80), are random and arbitrary in provenance, and limited in the scope of their use. As they cannot be traced to any English "primitives" which might legitimize their status,
cant words are terms whose meanings cannot be ascertained by reference to an origin, or for that matter, to any links in the chain of a language's history. In this sense, however, cant words represent the force of language unchained (at least in Johnson's scheme of things) by an overarching historical narrative — words whose meanings may be determined not according to their place in some organic whole but only within the here and now of their use. "Always in a state of increase or decay" (par. 80), cant words flash arbitrarily onto the scene of language and just as quickly pass away, without connection to any history, their meanings known only to those who occupy the same space in which they are employed. In their disregard for historical continuity, indeed, their disconnectedness from the organic processes of language, along with the particularity (as opposed to the universality) of their application, cant words represent a dangerous contradiction to the method Johnson discerns in language. Most threatening perhaps is the fact that they suggest that meaning may, in some cases (more alarmingly, of course, in all cases) be a function not of some semantic continuity in which words possess the sort of quasi-material and transtemporal status which allows one to speak of their "history," but rather of a break in the presence and identity which such a history implies by the actual event of utterance. Cant words thus suggest the possibility that meaning is a function of disruption not continuity, that is, a function of the event of utterance and not of its history. As such, language bears no trace of that material-like quality which may be attributed to words by reifying utterances as stages of an organic history. Rather, we are left with difference and relation. This is madness of course, at
least from the perspective of method, and must be condemned as such, which Johnson
does in his explanation in the Plan of the fundamental importance of etymology to his
dictionary:

By tracing in this manner every word to its original and not admitting, but
with great caution, any of which no original can be found, we shall secure
our language from being over-run with cant, from being crowded with low
terms, the spawn of folly or affectation, which arise from no just
principles of speech, and of which therefore no legitimate derivation can
be shewn. (16)

Etymology, and the notion of an orderly progression of meaning with which it is
coe xtensive in the Dictionary, thus constitute a line of defence against the disruptive
effects of cant. In this passage from the Plan, for example, cant is associated with
caprice -- "affectation" -- and with madness or "folly." Such connections are not
surprising, given that Johnson sees cant in opposition to the method (or "just principles")
he perceives to be at work in language. Unextraordinary too is the suggestion we have
here in the reference to "low terms," that this category of language use -- presumably,
along with the threat it harbours -- is identified with the lower ranks of Augustan society.
What is surprising, however, is the association which becomes apparent in other
references in both the Plan and the "Preface" of cant with death. The line which Johnson
draws with his dictionary, it becomes clear, runs between method and madness: on the
one side lies the domain of language use deemed "legitimate," the "just principles" or
method governing its use, the organic or living status ascribed to that method, and the
stable social order which it maintains; on the other, cant and the arbitrary madness by
which it is possessed, along with its death-like power to disrupt method, and the capacity for this disruption to produce social or class chaos. What must be noted, however, is this: borders, such as that which we say Johnson draws in order to divide method from madness, do not simply separate things — they also mark a boundary which those things have in common, that is, the limit marked by the fact of their difference. Viewed in this way, the line which Johnson draws against cant takes on the aspect of a limit not separating two areas but rather running through all that is coextensive with the notion of "meaning": that is, through the linguistic, but also through the social, the political, the economic, the ontological, etc. What this limit "describes," then, is an ungraspable and unrepresentable dimension which, for want of a better word, I have associated with language, but which is common to these other areas as well.

6. Between History and Event

This limit is not adumbrated in any feature of the Dictionary which we might call "positive." Rather, it is inscribed in the profound ambivalence which the text demonstrates towards the efficacy of its own project. As I have suggested, that ambivalence manifests itself as an oscillation between the expression of a desire that language possess the sort of coherent identity which would allow one to "fix" it or, failing that, permit one to account adequately for its mutability, and the actual contradiction and miscarriage of that desire in the execution of any attempt to realize it. I have so far used a number of different terms to express the opposite poles of this
oscillation, the movement between which opens a space in representation in which this limit becomes apparent. I have suggested, for example, that the Dictionary is marked by an agonistic interaction between two extremities which I have identified with desire and death and that this conflict manifests itself in the manner in which Johnson's representation of language shuttles between the "method" of an organic conception of linguistic development in which each utterance holds a determinate place and the "madness" of the random suspension and disruption of method which characterizes the actual instant of utterance. To the extent that Johnson's method grounds language in a particular notion of history, that notion is subjected to the same disruptive tension and ambivalence as that which I have said permeates the text in general. This ambivalence which -- and this is a point on which we must be clear -- transects both language and history, is apparent in the undecided manner in which the notion of meaning is constructed in the definitions themselves. Generally speaking, the opposition obtains between whether the meaning of any particular word is to be considered a legacy of the past and thus a "durable" substance, or a function of the context of its actual utterance and thus an indeterminate event. In both cases, history and language are thoroughly imbricated, each conception of language being coextensive with a particular conception of history and vice versa. On the one hand, the key semantic elements of Johnson's definitions -- the etymologies, "explanations" or "interpretations," and the quotations which illustrate those explanations -- are presented in such a way so as to conform to and bear out the notion that history embodies a coherent whole in which events, including
linguistic events, progress in an orderly and uninterrupted succession. From this perspective, Johnson's definitions are constructed so as to emphasize those aspects of a word which are continuous over time, foregounding the genealogy of its meaning and representing change as a sequence of linked developments rather than a turbulent and disorderly series of arbitrary disruptions. In this line of descent, the etymological radical functions as that "durable" (137) mark of pedigree which persists through time, linking the generations of utterance chronicled in the explanations and quotations, and allowing the lexicographer to distinguish those words of "legitimate derivation" (16) from the bastards of cant. On the other hand, the emphasis which Johnson places on continuity in the development of meaning is resisted in some important respects by the very techniques he enlists to establish the historical coherence of the language. For example, Johnson's use of etymology and quotation is partly, as we've seen, a response to his inability to determine at the microscopic level of language the presence of any innate meaning substance which would allow him to represent (and thus allow the reader to see) the continuity which he suggests obtains among the various significations of a word simply in that part of the definition he calls "explanation" or "interpretation." But, although invoked to compensate for the apparent absence of this elusive but potentially stabilizing element, neither etymology nor quotation provides convincing or conclusive proof of the sort of innate principle of development in language which would allow Johnson to display English (as he says in the Plan it is his desire) in such a way that its changes could appear to unfold on the printed page before the reader's eyes. One result
of the application of etymology and particularly quotation to the problem of definition and meaning is to alert the reader to the possibility that any semantic identity which one might perceive among morphologically similar utterances separated in time, may not be so much evidence of the presence of the sort of supra-historical element in language which would allow for such continuity as it is a retroactive effect of a dimension of language which we might call the rhetorical.

In both the *Plan* and the "Preface," Johnson presents etymology as a means of bringing order to English which, he complains "now stands in our dictionaries a confused heap of words without dependence, and without relation" (*Plan* 14). Etymology "is of great importance in examining the general fabrick of a language" (par. 20) and has a capacity, Johnson suggests, to produce effects of order such as that which he says English currently lacks, even effects which are without basis in fact. The "etymological extravagence" of Junius, who Johnson sardonically notes derives "dream from drama, because life is a drama, and a drama is a dream; and who declares with defiance, that no man can fail to derive moan from . . . monos, who considers that grief naturally loves to be alone" (par. 25) is proof of that. What is less certain, however, as these absurd derivations point out, is the question of whether the concatenated relations which etymologists establish among words correspond to any objective fact of organic continuity in language. Remarkably, for Johnson the exuberant excess of one such as Junius does not cancel the value of etymology as a means of determining the "method" or regularity of a language. To be sure, he notes, anticipating the incredulity with which etymologists'
claims are often met, the search for the "foreign progenitors" of English "will give occasion to many curious disquisitions, and sometimes perhaps to conjectures, which, to readers unacquainted with this kind of study, cannot but appear improbable and capricious" (Plan 14). But for such apparent aberrations, he cautions his readers, the etymologist should not be automatically blamed. Word histories may appear arbitrary, even absurd, but, Johnson argues, this is not necessarily the result of the etymologist's fancy. The etymologist merely registers the history of a language which, in an extraordinary concession to historicity (and in terms which recall the very ones in which he dismisses cant), Johnson writes is "produced by necessity and enlarged by accident, and . . . therefore composed of dissimilar parts, thrown together by negligence, by affectation, by learning, or by ignorance" (Plan 17). Any irregularities in such histories are therefore attributable to those who have used the language, but not to those who later attempt to find their way back along the faint, perplexing pathways of that use.

"It may be reasonably imagined that what is so much in the power of men as language, will very often be capriciously conducted" (14), Johnson writes in the Plan, thus localizing in "man" the source of the disruptive and arbitrary element of language apparent in linguistic change. What such a model obviates, however, is the possibility that this caprice is that of language itself -- indeed, "is" language -- the madness of which etymology seeks to methodize by imposing the continuity of a genetic-historical form on what is in fact a series of disparate and randomly-motivated events. Although, in the results of its method, etymology casts an aura of empirical certitude over language
change, its "discoveries" arise (as we will explore in our discussion of Tooke's *Diversions of Purley*) from the application of what is in fact a rhetorical device: paronomasia. As Derek Attridge explains, in paronomasia:

> two similar-sounding but distinct signifiers are brought together, and the surface relationship between them invested with meaning through the inventiveness and rhetorical skill of the writer. If that meaning is in the form of a postulated connection between present and past, what we have is etymology; if it's in the form of a postulated connection within the present, the result is word-play. (193)

No doubt Johnson would be appalled at the suggestion that any "dependence" or "relation" he might establish among the "confused heap" of English words which fill other dictionaries is the product of a process of rhetorical invention every bit as arbitrary and capricious as the wanton forces of language change against which the elements of his own dictionary are marshalled. Nonetheless, the process by which etymology imposes a determinate form upon the blank space in presence opened by the event of utterance is cognate with that inaugural reflex by which language turns away from the disarticulating violence of its own coming into being, erasing the incoherent blankness of that event ("saying") while figuring itself forth as an intuitable phenomenon. Etymology, in other words, is one link in the chain of substitutions precipitated by the originary phenomenalization of language which de Man calls positing: with etymology, the phenomenality of language is projected through time, effacing the blank incoherency of the space opened by the actual event of utterance and figuring forth, on the basis of this erasure, that phenomenalization of temporality we familiarly call "history." But, although
it is posited as an intuitable phenomenon and, as such, is liable to representation, analysis, and discussion, history as it is conceived here, remains an effect of a process in which language recoils from and thus effaces the unrepresentable incoherence of the event of its own taking place in utterance. This is not to say, however, that this reflex eradicates or neutralizes the disruptive force of the event of utterance. On the contrary, language, consisting precisely in a flickering movement between the random and heterogeneous break in presence and the erasure through figuration of the unrepresentable space opened in the instant of that incoherent event, always harbours (indeed, paradoxically "is") this capacity to interrupt the effect of (or desire for) presence embodied by such totalized figures of coherence as "history" or "language." While this ambivalence permeates every aspect of the *Dictionary*, including the role which etymology plays in the determination of meanings, the unsettling effects borne by the actual "event" of language become particularly apparent in Johnson's use of quotation to supplement his explanations of a word's meaning, a matter I will examine in the following chapter.
Chapter Four

Curing the Body of Language

1. Context as Limit

This is my starting point: no meaning can be determined out of context, but no context permits saturation.

— Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Borderlines"

In the "Preface," Johnson directs his readers' attention specifically to the quotations he employs, for it is in them, he writes, that the reader will find "the solution of all difficulties, and the supply of all defects" (par. 56) in the Dictionary. Quotation, for example, allows Johnson to distinguish subleties of meaning which explanation alone is too clumsy an instrument to tease apart. And, although the profusion of examples appended to certain definitions may seem excessive at times, he assures his readers that such richness must not be construed as a sign of redundancy:

a work of this kind is not hastily to be charged with superfluities: those quotations which to careless or unskilful perusers appear only to repeat the same sense, will often exhibit, to a more accurate examiner, diversities of signification, or, at least, afford different shades of the same meaning: one will shew the word applied to persons, another to things; one will express an ill, another a good, and a third a neutral sense; one will prove the expression genuine from an ancient author; another will shew it elegant from a modern: a doubtful authority is corroborated by another of more credit; an ambiguous sentence is ascertained by a passage clear and determinate; the word, how often soever repeated, appears with new
associates and in different combinations, and every quotation contributes something to the stability or enlargement of the language. (par. 65)

The stability to be derived from such a strategy, however, is precarious and uncertain at best. True, in arranging his quotations "according to the time of their authours" (par. 56) Johnson creates an effect of historical coherency and continuity which, in turn, motivates every particular quoted instance of that term by imbuing each with the significance which comes from being an integral part of a coherent whole. At the same time, however, in using quotation to supplement the inadequacy of periphrasis as a technique of definition, Johnson suggests the possibility that meaning is not so much a function of the historical trajectory of a word as it is of the context in which that word is used.

Such an emphasis on context renders any word whose meaning we may interrogate a mere place holder or expletive, a space with no inherent significance but whose semantic value is ultimately determined by extrinsic circumstances. As the lexicographer Charles Richardson complained in the preface to his own New Dictionary of the English Language in 1839, Johnson's Dictionary tends "to interpret the import of the context, and not explain the individual meaning of the word" (Richardson, I, 38; qtd. in DeMaria 164). The implication of this, of course, as a more recent critic has observed, is "that every usage of a word makes for a different meaning" (DeMaria 164). Such comments, however, like Johnson's citational method itself, beg an important question concerning
the nature of the relationship between context and meaning: if meaning is determined by context, how do we, with any certainty, determine the limits of context?

Jacques Derrida has demonstrated that, while meaning is a function of context, context itself is finally indeterminable and inexhaustible. Elaborating Derrida's point, Jonathan Culler notes there is a "structural openness" to context which permits the limitless decontextualization and recontextualization of any sign or sign sequence and, with this, the endless displacement of the meaning of those signs (On Deconstruction 124). Meaning, in other words, is nothing but context or, as Derrida puts it, "there are only contexts without any centre or absolute anchorage" (SEC 12). As such, context constitutes a sliding frame, changes in the dimensions of which alter the relations among and thus the meanings of the elements defined within that frame.

In its very limitlessness, however, context constitutes a limit, or more precisely, marks (in a manner with which we should by now be growing familiar, although not necessarily comfortable) a liminal dimension of language, unrepresentable as such and experienced only in the mood of pathos which attends any already doomed effort to represent its operations. "There is no limit in principle to what might be included in a given context" (123) writes Culler. By the same token, however, context forms a limit which, although it determines meaning, may not itself be comprehended by the effects of the instances of meaning which it enables. In this respect, context's liminal qualities resemble those which Johnson encounters in that part of his definition he calls the "explanation" and which he turns to quotation in order to supplement. I have said, for
example, that Johnson recognizes that explanation must ultimately be based on words "too plain to admit a definition" (128), that is, on words which, in their resistance to semantic reduction, mark the limit of language's capacity to represent its own meanings. Furthermore, I have noted that the core sense of these words may not be discovered as one might a phenomenon possessed of the stability and presence of a substance but can only be intuited, or experienced directly and unreflectively as an unmediated event of meaning. In a similar manner, context harbours an irreducible (but by no means positive) element which, cognate with the taking-place of language and thus unstable and unknowable in "itself," is beyond the reach of representation.

In Johnson's Dictionary, this liminal dimension of context manifests itself in quotation. As I have said, it is perhaps surprising that the very method Johnson adopts to supplement limitations he encounters in paraphrastic definition should display precisely those qualities which render explanation inadequate as a mode of definition (at least, that is, definition identified with the exhaustion of meaning, as it seems to be by Johnson). But, like a bad debt, the death-like blankness of the limit Johnson experiences in his frustrated desire for an immutable and positive meaning substance at the atomic level of language pursues him in each alternative effort he makes to simulate the stability that substance would have provided. When it is clear that he cannot find a meaning substance in words themselves, Johnson seeks to demonstrate the transhistorical identity of words, a task which requires that he assemble quotations in concatenated sequences which exhibit the organic coherency of the language. But quotation too, it will turn out, harbours, in
its relationship with context, that same disarticulating limit which, by the very insistence with which it disrupts any attempt to set meaning on a positive footing, seems to define both language and the task of lexicography. Language, it seems, is this limit which, perversely, is beyond language and which any attempt to represent language exhaustively or positively must necessarily confront. Even attempts to represent this failure (such as my own) inevitably fail: as Paul de Man notes, such models "of language's imposibility to be a model of language," are shown to be "consistently defective" (RT 19).

Johnson, then, seeks to delimit and fix the meaning of words by presenting them in the context of the passages he quotes, and arranging these passages in chronological chains which suggest the stability and continuity of the language over time. The efficacy of this method as a strategy for mastering meaning, however, is contradicted by certain features essential to quotation and, by implication, to context. Quotation, for example, is possible only to the extent that the quoted sign lacks the very stability which Johnson invokes quotation in order to determine. That Johnson may quote the passages he quotes (or, for that matter, that he may write at all) is possible only because, in order to signify, the sign must be repeatable beyond and in the absence of its original context. To clarify this point, which I have made before, we need only consider the question which Derrida poses in "Signature Event Context": "What would a mark be that could not be cited?" (12). The answer is difficult to imagine. Presumably, such a mark would occur once and once only, yet its occurrence (if such a thing could be said to "occur") would possess the adamantine presence of an infinite "oneness": durable, yes, but a sign, no. And
yet, this is precisely the sort of self-identical determinateness which Johnson seems to wish to delineate with his citational method.

To elaborate this point and prepare the way for a more detailed consideration of the function of quotation in the *Dictionary* and the specific manner in which quotation fails to provide the stability which Johnson seeks in it, a brief theoretical diversion is necessary. In emphasizing its status as the repetition of an utterance, quotation draws attention to the event of utterance. An aspect of language generally obscured by discourse, the event of utterance exposes something fundamental, and fundamentally disruptive, in signification. As that which is the condition of possibility of discourse, the event of utterance is, as I have said, beyond the reach of representation. An elementary but inscrutable instant of disruption which facilitates language's passage from self-sameness to actual discourse, this moment, identified in its various aspects with the linguistic phenomenon of deixis or with de Man's notion of inscription -- both of which have a special bearing on quotation -- exposes the limits of language. Christopher Fynsk has commented that these limits "cannot be understood as linguistic in a restricted sense (that is, in the sense that they might form the object of linguistic science)." By the same token, however, they "cannot be understood as other than language" (xxv). Language, "taken in this extended sense," Fynsk continues, "is a threshold we cannot cross in thought (though it is a threshold)" (xxv). To approach this threshold it will be necessary to consider quotation -- or more precisely, repeatability -- as an aspect of language which is at once the condition of possibility of the effects of identity and stability such as those
which Johnson seeks, and also that which forbids such identity from ever being anything more substantial than an effect. As a first step in this direction, it is necessary to elaborate the relationship between quotation and repeatability.

**Diversion 2: Quotation**

Repeatability, Derrida demonstrates in "Signature Event Context," is a fundamental, structurally-determined trait of the sign. But as Rodolphe Gasché is careful to point out, Derrida's notion of repeatability is not to be confused with common or empirical repetition (*Tain* 212). Where "repetition" typically evokes the notion of "a continuous modification and extenuation of presence" (*SEC* 7), i.e., a duplication or echo continuous with an original "entity, moment, instance, or the like" (*Tain* 212), repeatability doubles nothing simple, nothing simply or singularly present as such. Rather, repeatability consists in a *radical* repetition which constitutes, in its originary movement, the break in presence which makes empirical repetition possible and with it the effects of identity for which such repetitions are responsible. Because identity is an effect of repetition, any claim to presence which the apparently self-identical sign may make upon us is undone by the same gesture which allows that claim to come into being. In the absence of an empirical "original," repeatability does not consist in a simple duplication of a prior and determinate presence. Rather, its structure is essentially one of differentiation and deferral: every sign is a citation without original or, more precisely, a citation whose only original is citationality itself, a radical movement which
ruptures identity, hollowing out and diverting the always-already defaulted presence of
the sign through the other elements in the differential network in which it is inscribed,
while simultaneously re-citing it back to its own disrupted presence as the trace of that
which it is not. The identity of the sign is thus an effect of its repeatability in citation,
but (to repeat) its repeatability is a function of its inscription in a differential network of
signs in which no element possesses the determinateness or positivity of an original. As
a node in this web of difference, the sign consists in a "self-differentiating repetition or
citation" (Ryan 30). And although each instance of repetition seems to bear and confirm
the identity of its original, the fundamental diversion, alteration, or "othering" which is
its condition of possibility, forbids and defers the full realization of that identity, that is,
the full satisfaction of that desire for presence.

Derrida's paleonym "iterability," which combines the notion of repetition with that
of alteration (the latter sense which Derrida locates in the Sanskrit "itara," or "other"
[SEC 7]), conveys the essential role of différence in repetition and the effects of identity
for which it is responsible. As that which makes possible, but which also forbids, any
sign from achieving the sort of absolute stability which Johnson desires of language,
iterability, moreover, is the mark of the sign's radical lack of presence. This lack,
however, is not that of a "pure" or simple absence, that is, the negation of presence by
its absolute other. Such a cancellation would be merely what we have said Derrida calls
"a modification of presence" (8). The absence inscribed in the sign by the structure of
iterability consists, rather, in a radical "rupture in presence" (8) which forbids the
possibility of any totalized presence or absence in language. It is on the basis of this break that the sign "can be cited, put between quotation marks" (12). Indeed, as Michael Ryan explains, "without a movement of self-differentiating repetition or citation, there could be no event, no presence of the speech act" (30). Quotation then, the method which Johnson employs in the hope of fixing meaning, is itself possible only because of a fundamental dehiscence in the sign which makes any absolute determination, circumscription, or, indeed, definition of meaning unrealizable.

The repeatability of the sign renders "context" similarly indeterminable and incomplete in its relation to sign and meaning. The fact that the sign may be repeated beyond the confines of its "original" context -- i.e. beyond what Derrida calls "its 'original' desire-to-say-what-one-means (vouloir-dire)" (SEC 12) --means that no sign is bound to any single context for its meaning and, conversely, that no context may exhaust the meaning of a sign. Derrida argues that the sign is necessarily inscribed with the possibility that it may "break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" (12). The possibility of such a break is, as I have said, cognate with the rupture which enables identity effects while rendering any pure identity impossible. But it is also this dimension of the sign which prohibits context from cordoning off meaning in any absolute sense. In this way, the possibility that context might envelop meaning, defining the sign by functioning as its pure exterior, the way rock defines the form of a fossil, is broken by that same lack which ruptures the sign. The radical context of any sign is thus marked by that same
rupture which constitutes the fundamental movement of the sign: rupture, not presence, is the originary context of signification and thus of quotation. And it is in this sense that context, which Johnson invokes in order to delimit signification, constitutes, by virtue of the lack or break by which it is characterized, a limit to what can be known or said about language. Again, as we shall see, this limit manifests itself in Johnson's text in images of death.

2. Between *Langue* and *Parole*: Utterance as Context

The ungraspable is what one does not escape.

-- Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary"

The illimitable aspect of signification interrupts not only the integrity of the sign in its synchronic context, however, but also the determinateness of the organic historical context in which Johnson seeks to locate and thus stabilize every such instance of each sign. We should recall that, in his examples, Johnson presents words not merely in the context of individual quotations: the quotations he selects to illustrate each word are arranged chronologically, in accordance with the principle that every instance of a word embodies a distinct point in a larger, continuous, and organic history of the word and of the language in general. Johnson thus seeks to fix the "total" signification of a word by triangulating the meaning of that word as it appears in the context of a particular quotation with the place that particular instance occupies in the context of the chronologically-arranged chain of all of the instances which he quotes for that word.
Johnson, in other words, tries to determine the meaning of the word in question not only in the context of the quotations he isolates, but also in that of the trajectory of the organic narrative which those quotations presumably chart.

The conception of history as presence unfolding over time on which this strategy is based has the effect of imputing to each instant of that history the identity which comes from being part of a determinate whole and displacing the contingency of events with the coherency of sheer historical calculation. Such coherency, however, is possible only on the basis of an erasure of the rupture in presence which occurs in any instance of signification: this breach splits not only the positive identity which such a closed historical model attributes to each of its constituent moments, but also the homogeneous force or presence which such a scheme accords the actual event of the utterance. A coherent history composed of concatenated speech events is possible only if the heterogeneous nature of those events is effaced by a figurative gesture such as that which Johnson imposes with his invocation of the organic. But while such a strategy may have a reifying effect on the elements comprising that history, the event of utterance retains in its heterogeneous excess a capacity to break the coherency of any such totalizing figure. In the case of Johnson's Dictionary, this disruptive force resides in the fact of quotation itself.

Johnson’s use of illustrative quotation does more than simply emphasize the role of context in the production of meaning. By representing words in the context of their development, he also draws attention to the specific instant or event in which those words
are uttered. But, like the apparently irreducible particle which he despairs of ever finding in language, the moment of utterance -- the temporal "atom" of language -- is not simple but heterogeneous, enmeshed, like the word, in a network of difference and divided from itself from the outset.

The index of utterance's self-difference is the quotation mark. Whether it is actually indicated by italics, a line of attribution, or the appropriate diacritical marks, quotation (distinguished from that which is quoted) refers specifically to the actual event of discourse's coming-into-being, that is, to "saying" as opposed to the "said." For example, the name "John Locke" and the title "Essay" appended to the passage "If every particular Idea that we take in, should have a distinct name, names must be endless," which Johnson cites to illustrate one use of the word name, refer to and repeat the prior existence of these words in the context of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In a curious way, however, in doing so, the line of attribution indicates, in a manner which discourse typically obscures, the fact that the passage which it marks took place, that is, that it came into being through a singular event of utterance or writing. Quotation thus teases out and points up (although without describing it) that dimension of language which marks its having-come-into-being as discourse, its emergence "from the crypt where it prefers itself" (*OG* 193) or, more simply, "saying."

As Hans-Jost Frey notes, "saying" generally "is only accessible" insofar as something is said.² Quotation, however, enacts a subtle separation of saying and said, satisfying what Frey calls "the apparently absurd requirement of saying saying without
its becoming what is said, or: to say it as well as not to say it" ("Spume" 259). In a manner unlike even that of the word "saying" (in which, Frey says, "the act of saying, which makes possible saying's being said, recedes into an unreachable distance . . . precisely because it distorts saying into what is said" [259]), quotation restores saying to memory -- and thus to history -- by marking the difference and the space between the "said" (the quotation) and the event of utterance to which the quotation refers.

In its capacity to refer to the instant of the taking place of language as discourse, quotation thus resembles in some ways the function which we have said modern linguistics ascribes to deixis. As we have noted, deictics are that class of pronouns and other indicators whose specific meanings may be determined only by reference to the context in which they occur. With their lack of an objective referent, deictics highlight the inextricable bond of meaning with context and specifically with the reference to reference which occurs in the instance of utterance. Deixis, in other words, marks the workings of Benveniste's énoncé, the linguistic act which opens the space between the "saying" and the "said" which allows language to function as discourse. As the originary act of reference, utterance, referring to nothing but the event of its own taking place, and taking place by way of a rupturing of identity by difference, thus constitutes the fundamental context of all signification. The radical context of all texts, in other words, is rupture.

As context, however, utterance bears little resemblance to the more commonplace notion of context which Johnson invokes to fix meaning in the Dictionary: rather than
determining the meaning of any specific "uttered" from the outside (either in its relation to the other elements in the particular syntactical-grammatical unit in which it appears or to other such units between which and the "uttered" in question one assumes a continuous and organic historical relationship), context-as-utterance consists in the rupturing of the very identity which would allow one to distinguish one sign as simply exterior to another, i.e., as the context of another. In this, utterance is cognate with Derrida's notion of "spacing," that is, with that which makes it impossible "for an identity to be closed on itself, on the inside of its proper interiority, or on its coincidence with itself" (Positions 94). Not simply exterior then, the notion of context-as-utterance implies the impossibility of determining the simple "inside" or "outside" of an uttered, and thus the untenability of the contextual method Johnson adopts to display and determine meaning in both its synchronic and diachronic aspects: in the opening it breaches in language, context-as-utterance, like spacing, is "the index of an irreducible exterior, and at the same time, of a movement, a displacement that indicates an irreducible alterity" (Positions 81).

Again, we arrive at the irreducible limit of language only to discover not the stable substance Johnson desires but an opening, at once an "interval" and a "'productive,' 'genetic,' 'practical' movement" (Positions 94). Set in motion by utterance, marked by deixis, and adumbrated in quotation, this liminal operation of differentiation and deferral, which is the radical context of all "uttereds," brings language-as-discourse into being by interrupting precisely the sort of determinate identity which Johnson, in his effort to "fix" meaning, ascribes both to history and to language.
Here we should recall that both history and language are presented in the Dictionary as aggregates of discrete, positive lexical or temporal units, the identity of any one of which may be confirmed by reference to the place it occupies in the body of the organic, providentially-motivated whole. But, intervening at the instant of the event of utterance, the inaugural rupture of language inscribes (and thus splits) the interiority of such totalized figures of language and history with the irreducible exteriority of otherness. For language to "emerge" as discourse, however, the incoherence and irreducible otherness of this instant must also be effaced with the same gesture by the text of the uttered which it produces. The organic history which Johnson invokes emerges through a repetition of the same process, although in its case the figural effacement of the incoherence of the event of utterance is mapped back over the abyss of temporality itself, obliterating the radical disruption which is the condition of possibility of "history" with a determinate figure of continuous, organic development.

But although the heterogeneity and indeterminateness of the inaugural event of language and history may be ostensibly effaced, traces of that liminal opening must necessarily remain in effect. For example, insofar as it cites the instant of the coming-into-being of discourse in utterance, quotation adumbrates the blank incoherence and radical otherness of "saying" which thus haunts the quoted "said" like a flickering spectre. To appeal to quotation, in other words, as a means of embodying language or history in an organic form is to expose that body to a visitation by its spectral other — to an out-of-body experience of sorts — and thus to the irreducible limit which otherness
shadows forth and the threat of dissolution such an encounter holds for all notions of identity.

But, as the condition of possibility of language, this threshold, like death, is inaccessible to representation. As such, it appears only negatively in the *Dictionary*, in the breaks, for example, between the various oppositions which structure the movement of the text and between which the text oscillates, the poles of which I have crudely generalized as desire on the one hand and death on the other. Related to this undecidable dimension of the *Dictionary* and thus intimating the limit of language which I have been discussing, is Johnson’s ambivalence to the possibility that there exists within language an immutable and material element, that is, something in language which opposes us with the resistance of a physical thing and which as such may become an object of knowledge. From the outset, Johnson dismisses as a vain “wish” the possibility that words might be inhabited by an atomic substance. At the same time, however, we have seen that this effaced desire continues to haunt Johnson’s encounter with language in the form of an implicit wish that the materiality which he acknowledges is unavailable to him at the atomic level may be discovered in another aspect of language, specifically its historical dimension.

Such ambivalence is the mark of the threshold which Johnson repeatedly confronts as he probes language for a potentially stabilizing element. Because the resistance of language inheres not in any positive feature but in the movement of differentiation and deferral which ruptures presence, that which is resistant in language is also that which
renders any attempt to fix or describe it undecidable. Such attempts will always be stranded on the threshold of language, caught in the blinking of the space of difference which brings discourse into being. Even when Johnson enacts a gesture which might, it seems, neutralize the disruptive force of the event of utterance by inscribing it in the determinate whole of an organic history, the ambivalence tortures his efforts, twisting and dismembering the figures with which he attempts to represent the body of language, ultimately rendering the representation indeterminate. Again, it is in such figural disjunctions and disfigurations and the images of death which invariably accompany them that the limit of language is shadowed forth.

3. "Between Here and Nowhere": Curing the Body of Language

The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere.

— Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary"

The pattern of this particular disfiguration is consistent with that which I described earlier in which a desire for perfection is interrupted by an accidental and arbitrary element identified somehow with death. In this instance, Johnson's repressed desire for a meaning substance is expressed in the organic notion that every language "has a time of rudeness prior to perfection, as well as of false refinement and declension" ("Preface," par. 62). The figural link between language and vegetable life established here, however, is complicated by other references in the Plan and "Preface" which associate
language with the life of language's human "authour." In the "Preface," for example, Johnson comments, "it is incident to words, as to their authours, to degenerate from their ancestors, and to change their manners when they change their country" (par. 27). Only suggested here, the actual nature of the relationship between the human and the linguistic is more clearly articulated in the Plan. In a passage which immediately follows his acknowledgement of the "wish" that the "fundamental atoms of our speech might obtain the firmness and immutability of the primogenial and constituent particles of matter," Johnson writes:

But this is a privilege which words are scarcely to expect; for, like their author, when they are not gaining strength, they are generally losing it. Though art may sometimes prolong their duration, it will rarely give them perpetuity, and their changes will be almost always informing us, that language is the work of man, of a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be derived. (18; emphasis added)

Words, we are told, are "like their author" in that both are subject to mutability. Any identity, however, between the two which Johnson might claim to exist is undone by his actual description of their relationship. "Language is the work of man," he writes: the link between them is thus not one of likeness, identity, or necessity but rather of labour, production, and thus contingency, which is to say, not metaphoric but metonymic. As Paul de Man points out in "Semiology and Rhetoric," "the inference of identity and totality that is constitutive of metaphor is lacking in the purely relational metonymic contact: an element of truth is invoked in taking Achilles for a lion but none in taking Mr. Ford for a motor car" (AR 14). Far from offering grounds for the sort of analogy
Johnson draws in this passage between "man" and language, the "purely relational" point of contact (which we shall call "work"), is a locus of difference and, as such, a space exposed to precisely the sort of contingent forces which Johnson invokes the organic in order to dispel.

A familiar pattern repeats itself here, this time with metaphor and metonymy in the irreconcilable positions of desire and death, of the "said" and "saying." Calling on metaphor to establish that which, in the previous paragraph, he says one can only "wish" to find in fact, Johnson ascribes to language the organic form of its human "author." The coherency of this figure, and with it the determinateness of its constitutive elements, is interrupted, however, when the relationship of identity which Johnson says obtains between the human and language is subsequently described in the metonymic and thus differential terms of "work." Metonymy, in other words, intervenes in the totality posited by metaphor, breaking up its coherency, leaving "language" (and with it, the "human") oscillating uncertainly between the poles of identity and difference. In this moment of figural dissonance, the blank limit marked by the desire for the "fundamental atoms" of speech, and momentarily obscured by the imposition of metaphoric identity, reasserts itself in all of its perplexing unintelligibility.

The limit this ambivalence marks asserts itself, however, even where the mode of figuration linking language with the living, human body is stable. In one particularly striking passage from the "Preface," the element of difference and undecidability with which metonymy interrupted the metaphoric identity of language in our previous example,
manifests itself in an actual diametric shift in the vehicle Johnson employs in his figure for language. In this reversal, language is stranded in the uncertain space between life and death:

Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but not begin to fear that I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify. When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided who, being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation. (par. 84)

This passage repeats the basic rhetorical pattern which I have said characterizes the Dictionary: it begins, for example, with a desire (again, a desire of others) that the Dictionary might resist the forces of "time and chance" and thus "fix" language. As before, this wish is negated, this time by "reason" and "experience," the latter of which, by implication, takes on the deathly aspect of contingency. The lexicographer's failure to find something in language resistant to "time and chance" exposes a lack in language and with it the unsettling possibility that language is nothing but "time and chance." In response to this disturbing prospect, however, Johnson invokes metaphor, imputing to language the status of a living, albeit decrepit, human body: with such a move he seeks to recuperate rhetorically for language what he could not discover empirically, circumscribing contingency within the telos of an organic process attributed
metaphorically to language. Although the figure of language as a dying man occupies a position of proof in his allegory of the *Dictionary*’s production, it remains nonetheless a displaced figure of the original desire for stability. As such, it is vulnerable to the same possibility of contradiction and failure as that which interrupted that inaugural desire. What remains at stake (and thus unsettled) in this passage is the question of the proper function of the *Dictionary* in relation to the body of language and, more significantly, the status of that body itself. Is it a living body or, like Caesar’s, a corpse animated by rhetoric?

In this passage, Johnson clearly acknowledges the inevitability of language change, dismissing as charlatanism the notion that a dictionary might provide a language with eternal life. He elaborates this position later in the “Preface,” maintaining, we should note, the figure of language as a living organism:

If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated. (par. 91)

By this formulation, the *Dictionary* cannot eradicate death, only delay its inevitable arrival. But the representation of the text as palliative, like the organic representation of language with which it is coextensive, itself palliates the work of a more radical contingency for which there is no literal expression and of which terms such as “chance,” “change,” “death,” and, as we shall see, “cant” are only figures. The possibility here arises that language change is Johnson’s concern in the *Dictionary* only insofar as it
marks an unnameable and undefinable limit where language-as-discourse comes into being, a radically non-self-identical dimension utterly (but insubstantially) resistant to the sort of taxonomic representation one expects a dictionary, by definition, to provide. Linguistic change, in other words adumbrates a dimension of radical contingency in language which renders the thought of "fixing" words and their meanings absurd. Without this "chance" element (which is also the limit of language) there would be no language change because, in its unimaginable absence, language could never emerge as discourse. Johnson's text is thus caught in a bind, for the condition of possibility of language emerging as discourse is also and at once the condition of the impossibility that a linguistic entity such as a dictionary might anatomize the "body" of language. Any attempt to describe that body will inevitably repeat the ambivalence of the blank, differential limit which language change marks -- which is precisely what occurs in the passage with which I began this discussion.

In invoking a metaphor of organic development as a response to the problem of linguistic change, Johnson would seem to have laid the spectre of the radical contingency of language to rest: although language may change, every instant of that history is answerable to the organic structure in which it is inscribed. And yet, in its own effort to master, or at least to obviate its own aporetic status as a text, the Dictionary is compelled repeatedly to describe, albeit negatively, the ambivalence of the space in which it is inscribed. It is the force of contingency inhering in the trope of metonymy, for example, which breaks up the figural totality of the first organic metaphor of language
we examined. And, as chance would have it, the same disruptive force dislocates the coherency of the figure which, in the long passage with which we began this section, Johnson explicitly rejects the possibility that language may be fixed.

This passage turns on the explicit metaphoric identification of language with the human body, and of attempts to arrest language change, such as that embodied by a dictionary, with the "elixir" which would preserve that body from death. Just as the universality of death in human experience attests to the ineffectiveness of all "elixirs of life," the fact that no "nation has preserved their words and phrases from mutability" suggests that all attempts to stop language change are futile: like the human body, the body of language will age and one day die. Such, at least, is the initial impression created by this passage. With its final lines, however, there occurs a subtle shift with drastic implications. Up to that point, the analogy which was being developed suggested that language shared the same status as a living human body which no artificial means could preserve from change and, ultimately, from death. It is as futile, Johnson continues, for someone to believe in the existence of an elixir which has the power to ward off death as it is for the lexicographer to "imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay" (par. 84; emphasis added). With these words, the previously living body of language has been inexplicably transfigured into a corpse; with it, the function of the *Dictionary* has altered from that of palliative to preservative.
How are we to explain this slippage except by the non-explanation: it was an accident, as inexplicable as any chance occurrence. And yet, as an accident, this disruption of the representation of language as a living form by death conforms uncannily to the pattern of contingency laying waste to each gesture with which the text asserts the determinateness of language which we have seen over and over in the Dictionary. Such totalizing gestures, I have said, are displaced expressions of a desire for meaning substance, the possibility of which language, in the resistance it poses to us (and which allows it to become an object of cognition) seems always to promise and yet never to fulfil. As such, the figures by which the Dictionary seeks to totalize language also mark negatively the blank limit in language which analysis cannot exhaust or saturate and which, in its utter indifference to method or to "any human desire to signify" can only be characterized by the notion of madness or accident.

The slippage of this figure of language is thus an accident, to be sure, but one whose accidentality -- or failure -- is inscribed in advance as a possibility of figuration itself. Figuration, we should recall, is a reflex coextensive with the inaugural accident which allows language to emerge as discourse. And while it may efface the unrepresentable blankness and incoherency of the originary disruption of presence which is the condition of possibility of discourse, it is also, by the same token, thoroughly imbricated with the accidental, inscription and figuration each the shadow of the other. The empirical accident of slippage, in other words, is an effect or repetition of a more originary, "absolute" accidentality which, as the blank rupture in presence which
figuration must efface, is also the condition of possibility of the positing of any figure of language, whether in the positive form of a living body or the negative one of a cadaver. The fact that, in this particular instance, the vehicle for the figure of language with which Johnson "cancels" (but also expresses) the desire for a meaning substance may slip so easily into its opposite indicates the razor edge — indeed, a razor edge which is pure edge — of difference on which the Dictionary or any "uttered" balances, an edge, moreover of which the cadaver is a visible sign.

Diversion 3: Death

... death is, in the widest sense, a phenomenon of life . . .

— Martin Heidegger, Being and Time

At first sight, the image does not resemble a cadaver, but it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image.

— Maurice Blanchot, "Two Versions of the Imaginary"

The corpse is, in one sense, the negative expression of the presence the living body seems to incarnate: it is the "other" of that determinate presence, its flip side which, still continuous with its opposite, remains that version of presence which we have said Derrida describes as a "distant presence" (SEC 7). And yet, as the other of the living body of language, the figure of the corpse exposes, in its alterity, the incomprehensible unrepresentability of the limit — call it absolute death — which, at once,
differentiates the living body from the corpse but which also is inscribed in each by virtue of their relationship with the other. What the corpse shares with the living body, in other words, is the boundary of difference which, in separating them, is also inscribed in each as the trace of its difference from the other. In the difference it poses to the living body, the corpse exposes the uncertain position which that body occupies in Johnson's text, opening both figures of language, as well as the text itself, to a radical disruption and thus to the oscillation we find in the passage quoted above.

Such oscillation is apparent not only in Johnson's text, however, but also in the ambivalence with which we are confronted in the corpse itself. Like language, the corpse is at once the most obsequious yet recalcitrant of entities: neither quite presence nor absence, figure nor ground, neither exclusively an effect of desire nor a result of its failure, the corpse establishes a relation between such determinate poles, or as Blanchot says, "between here and nowhere" ("Two Versions" 81). The oscillations between the poles "describe" or adumbrate the unrepresentable limit which is common to both.

The corpse occupies a position in human experience not unlike that of the word "death" (or any word for that matter). This is not simply a matter of resemblance. In the corpse, we might say, the limit of language and the limit of experience blur together and overlap. On the one hand, the corpse is an index of the unsettling possibility of the living body emptied of its capacity for experience; that is, in the corpse we confront the possibility of the interruption of experience by "what cannot be experienced meaningfully" (Clark, "Monstrosity" 31), that limit which we familiarly call, by way of
catachresis, "death." On the other hand, the corpse is also that which grants this unrepresentable event a human form, which gives death a human face. Although it is not death, the corpse is all we get of death. It stands in metaleptically for death, effacing with the familiar form of the beloved the incoherence of the event of which that body is the remainder, occupying, but not filling, the space opened in experience by what Rilke calls the "imageless act" ("ein Tun ohne Bild") ("Ninth Elegy" 46). Both the word "death" and the corpse then are figures, one catachrestic, the other metaleptic, which give a shape to the unnameable, the one to hold a syntactical space in language, the other to occupy a ritual space in experience. In this, the corpse is the paradigm of the expletive. Like those terms which in dead languages Johnson says "are suffered to pass for empty sounds of no other use than to fill a verse, or to modulate a period" (par. 44), the corpse is a spaceholder which, by circumscribing the random, imageless, and incoherent event of death within a determinate form -- in Blanchot's language, giving the "nowhere" of death the deictical status of a "here" -- grants "life," as the other or exterior of that space, the fullness and identity of a similar determinateness. In allowing an exclusive identification of the dead with whatever it is which is signified by "death," the corpse silently and without protest effaces the work of negativity in the experience of the living and with it, the blank unintelligibility of which the word "death," like the corpse, are indices.

But although the word "death" and the corpse may occupy space, both are still, at bottom, "empty sounds," featureless ruptures beyond interpretation, the
determinateness of which occurs only by way of the effacement of that incoherency through the imposition of form. Neither the corpse nor the word "death," in other words, is literally that which it seems to indicate. Rather, as "empty sound" both expose an interstitial limit inaccessible to cognition or language. Nothing, of course, is more literal than a corpse. Such literalness, however, is (perversely, it seems) beyond words - - literalness itself, if such a thing could be imagined. Which is precisely the point. The absolutely literal, whether embodied in the corpse or in the word "death," or in any word if considered as empty sound, is not experienceable as such, is not nameable as such but rather constitutes a blank opening, a disruption which must be blotted out for language, thought, cognition, and experience to take place.

The corpse then establishes a relation between its own strange presence and that of the living body. In so doing, however, it also marks the limit which obtains between such presences and the absolute disruption of presence which is the condition of possibility of difference and relationality. This limit -- absolutely literal, knowable only in the gesture of turning away from it -- establishes difference not merely between the bodies of the living and the dead but within them as well: although the corpse is, in one sense, and as I said earlier, "the negative expression of the presence the living body seems to incarnate," the possibility of that difference tells us that the living body exists as such only in relation to something else and, thus necessarily includes within itself "the trace of its difference from the Other" (Gasché 129). Which is to say, the limit which is the condition of possibility of difference and thus of identity is also that which places
the body at odds with itself. As we have seen, one name for this unnameable, absolutely literal limit is "death." If then the living body may experience its life only by virtue of its imbricated relation with the corpse and thus through the trace it bears within itself of that differential limit we have identified with the imageless event of death, that which is most alive in the living body, and thus in Johnson's living body of language, is that limit marked clumsily by the word "death." What is most alive in language is its death.

4. Accident and Nomination: Language on Edge

The outside, "spatial" and "objective" exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the grammé, without différence as temporalization, without the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present.

-- Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology

In the attempt to establish through metaphor the stability which he cannot determine empirically, Johnson again exposes the liminal status of language. To recall, Johnson employs an organic metaphor of language in order to circumscribe within a determinate process the disruptive effects of "time and chance" on language. But, in its sudden shift from living body to corpse, Johnson's figure for language is disrupted by precisely that which it is apparently invoked to hold at bay: the accidental. In positing two opposing vehicles for the figure of language, one the living body, the other the corpse, the accidental creates a condition of undecidability within the figure, causing it to oscillate between the two alternatives. With this restless movement the figure exposes a nonsemantic space which, belonging properly to neither language-as-corpse nor
language-as-living-body, is rather the limit marking not only their difference from each other but also, by virtue of the differential relation which obtains between them, the inscription within each of its difference from the other. This opening, which breaches the identity of both, rendering each different not only from the other but also from itself, prohibiting each from ever being fully present to itself as such, circulates through both as that differential element which they have in common. In splitting the identity of each, this element routes identity (for example, the identity of the living body) through its other (in this case, the corpse), before returning it, in terms of its own alterity, back to its own ruptured self, that is, as that which it is not. Here we must remember that, in this system "without positive terms," that which interrupts presence can be no more fully present (or absent) than that which it interrupts, that is, it cannot be "present" in the system except by way of a prior interruption or what Derrida calls the "anterior default of a presence" (OG 145). Any presence or identity which this opening may seem to possess, therefore, is not that of a determinate phenomenon or substance but rather an effect of the resistance the interruption poses to itself in the moment of self-displacement which brings it into being. Utterly arbitrary -- arising without relation to anything "that comes before or after" (de Man, SD 117) -- and absolutely negative (as opposed to relatively so) -- that is, no simple "presence at a distance" (Positions 81), either positive or negative -- this movement "indicates an irreducible alterity" (81). As the non-significative dimension of discourse which is the condition of possibility of relation, identity, representation, cognition, and meaning, this movement is itself beyond representability and
meaningfulness. The resistance experienced in the coming-into-being of this interruption is that of an event which, entirely unmotivated, indeterminate, and illegible is utterly indifferent to and incommensurable with human understanding. And yet, in its absolute resistance to understanding, this limit functions as the negative basis for the phenomenality which, to draw on Cynthia Chase's succinct description of linguistic materiality, is "conferred on meanings, on signifieds, and ultimately on things" ("de Man" 195). By way of a figurative gesture, the resistance of the inaugural moment of signification (utterance) to the irreducible otherness of the event of its own coming into being is confused with the resistance of a determinate thing or presence. In this regard, we could say that the resistance posed by language to itself in the moment of its coming-into-being as discourse constitutes an unthinkable, unrepresentable limit from whose disarticulating violence the understanding must turn from (or, we could also say, must impose a form upon) in order to protect itself from annihilation and dissolution. And yet, in this turning/imposition, figuration creates the effect that there is indeed something positive to turn from or impose upon, a ground which becomes the basis of its own claim to phenomenality.

In conferring the phenomenality of a substance upon the resistance experienced in the inaugural and imageless self-displacement which allows language to emerge as discourse, language extends the promise that it consists of something more substantial than "time and chance." And yet, as we have seen, such a promise is necessarily hollow, any linguistic substance it might seem to indicate arising strictly as an effect of a
defensive reflex, that is, from the figurative imposition of form and meaning on the unrepresentable limit exposed in the event in which the promise is uttered. To take language up on its promise and to ask it to reveal those "fundamental atoms of speech" (Plan 18) is to confront the incomprehensible blankness of that limit. The resistance this limit poses to cognition, moreover, is not that of the opposition one associates with physical bodies and which tells us that those bodies exist external to ourselves: it consists, rather, in a constant deflection and deferral of the desire for such a determinate presence, similar to Johnson's own comparison of the quest for lexicographical perfection to the Arcadians' pursuit of the sun, "which, when they had reached the hill where he seemed to rest, was still beheld at the same distance from them" ("Preface" par. 72).

While Johnson may explicitly acknowledge the impossibility of discovering a meaning substance in language, that admission does not necessarily indicate that he has relinquished the desire for such a substance, nor does it mark an escape from the thought of language as presence. Rather it strands him, on edge, in a linguistic no-man's land between desire and its failure, in the space of a ubiquitous interval, the undecidability of which compels him to repeat in his text the very movement of language which he cannot explicitly acknowledge or describe. Just as figuration effaces the blank accidentality of the prephenomenal interval opened in language with utterance, Johnson's text recoils from the space which the desire for presence exposes in language; in turning away, the text ascribes to the resistance-without-presence this space offers the determinateness of a physical body, and specifically the substance of a human body. Such a conferral of form
onto an unnameable blankness, however, is always vulnerable to the capricious disruptions of the event-like breaching of presence which it would blot out. In the case of Johnson's somatic figure of language, this unnameable element returns as an accident which disrupts the coherency of the figure itself. To take this mobile figure literally, language "is" not quite a living body, but neither is it a corpse: it is, somehow, an inexorable movement -- a relation -- between these two determinate presences, neither this nor that, here nor there but rather the edge or the limit between such positions, a radically intermediate middle ground whose absolute indeterminateness interrupts whatever determinateness language may seem to possess. The accidental slippage in Johnson's figure for language exposes an essential accidentality in language: it suggests that language "is" the liminal movement adumbrated only in the failure to say what language is.

**Diversion 4: Community**

Nomination is important, but it is constantly caught up in a process that it does not control.

-- Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Borderlines"

But the limit which is marked in Johnson's text in the failure of language to reveal itself as a presence, cannot be the property of language alone: such a limit contradicts the possibility of something "proper" to language, or that language could be considered alone and thus possessed of a certain unqualified immanence. Rather, this limit circulates
through all that is apparently proper -- that is, through all that is designated with a name\textsuperscript{6} -- as that which is at once the condition of possibility of naming but also which, by opening the name to the workings of "time and chance" and thus to otherness, forbids that name from ever standing properly alone.

The exposure of the proper to the limit marked by such chance interruptions is apparent in the manner in which concepts of language, society, knowledge, and history are frequently imbricated in the Enlightenment discourse on language.\textsuperscript{7} As in Johnson's \textit{Dictionary}, liminality is never described as such in these words but emerges rather in a certain undecidability which subtly haunts those concepts which the text places in relation to one another. Such indeterminateness tends to turn on the question of the priority of the apparently determinate terms of the relationship. This is the case, for example, in the relationship between ideas and words in Locke's \textit{An Essay Concerning Human Understanding}. As William Keach observes, "while Locke often writes as if ideas in the mind preexist the words we use to represent them, he sometimes gives words a constitutive role in our having ideas in the first place" (99). Such a dilemma, however, is an inevitable corollary of a thought which seeks to examine and represent relations among such concepts without relinquishing or even interrogating the determinateness of the terms which comprise those relationships. Immanence, whether of the concepts of language, community, knowledge, or history, is ultimately incommensurable with the possibility of relation: that which is immanent or fully present to itself necessarily exists
in a state of absolute irrelation, entirely for itself and beyond difference as a sort of eternal accident.

The desire to think immanence and difference at once explains, in part, the preoccupation in Enlightenment and Romantic theories of language with the question of origin. Only by positing a common event of origin -- an original moment of coming-into-being-in-relation -- is it possible to maintain, however tentatively, the thought of the simultaneous immanence and relationality of language, community, thought, and history such as what we find in Locke, Condillac, Monboddo, Smith, Johnson, and, as we shall see, Joseph Priestley, and John Horne Tooke. Such a gesture effaces the accidentality of the ubiquitous disruption of presence I have identified as "the limit" with the figure of a unitary, divinely-motivated act of creation, an original limit (an utterance, of course) which serves as the ground and guarantee of the determinateness of all phenomena. According to the logic of this system, God functions as the agent of difference, but because he figures as an absolute presence, all of the elements in the system he has created are resolvable into the unity of his immanence. Everything, including "time and chance," is part of a whole and, as such, participates in the determinateness of that whole.

For example, in Locke's Essay, human language and human sociability are interconnected phenomena. Language, for Locke, is "the great Conduit, whereby Men convey their Discoveries, Reasonings and Knowledge from one to another" (III, xi, 5). Any imperfections or abuses of language which "break or stop the pipes" whereby this
knowledge "is distributed to the publick use and advantage of Mankind" (III, xi, 5) are ultimately to the detriment of the community. Although in this model, language and community are mutually-implicated throughout history, there is one moment in their relationship which is privileged above all others and that is the moment of their common genesis. As Locke writes in the opening paragraph of Book Three of the Essay: "God having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society" (III, I, i). In figuring forth the limit which we have said is constitutive of all effects of presence as a single, primordial act by an immanent being and positing that event as the common ground and source of community, language, and, as this passage suggests, the subject, Locke is able to consider the ways in which human language and community influence one another without having to consider that their relationship may be reciprocally determining and thus calling into question the determinateness and coherency of these categories.

Such a model of the community as immanent and the agreement or social contract among its members on which Locke and Rousseau base that model, however, assumes the prior constitution of the signatories of that agreement as free and autonomous subjects, already immanent to themselves (Van Den Abbeele xii) -- this despite the fact, as we have seen, that the existence of at least one of those parties emerges only "through the contract it is nevertheless supposed to be able to sign" (Bennington 233). The
immanent subject -- the subject which is fully present to itself -- however, is necessarily also the immortal subject, and a community of such subjects is one in which its members would not witness the deaths of each other. This is to say that any model of community which bases itself on such a transcendental notion of the subject elides the role which the experience of the death of the other plays in the taking-place of community.

As the French post-Heideggerians Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy have variously argued, community is not the product of a merger agreement among an aggregate of immanent subjects;\textsuperscript{10} rather it is that which is revealed in what Nancy calls "the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject" (Nancy 15). In its most extreme instance, this revelation occurs to the individual in his or her experience of the dead other. Death, as embodied in the corpse, constitutes a most peculiar limit. On the one hand, death is the only phenomenon which is inalienably and properly our own: it is death which renders \textit{Dasein} complete and without which \textit{Dasein} is impossible.\textsuperscript{11} At the same time, however, death is also that which may never be assimilated to experience in any meaningful way, let alone communicated. The closest we may come to experiencing the phenomenon of death is in witnessing the death of the other. In the death of the other, however, we do not confront death as such -- only a peculiar limit which is at once inscribed in our being as its own most proper possibility but also held away from us as that which is beyond cognition. As the remainder of that event, the corpse makes us witness to the fact that that which is most properly our own and most properly constitutive of our being cannot be experienced except in others. "If
it sees its fellow being die, a living being can subsist only outside itself . . ." (qtd. in Nancy 15), writes Georges Bataille. In the death of the other, the subject is exposed in dramatic fashion to the "finitude" or self-difference of its own being, a disruption in the face of which the self cannot maintain the thought of its own interiority but rather is exiled -- diverted through the other -- to an absolute outside in which it is bound to that other, most emphatically (although not exclusively) embodied in the corpse. The corpse, in other words, in holding from the living being the secret of its own most proper self, opens the subject to the impossibility of its own immanence. In so doing, it exposes difference -- and specifically the self-difference which is apparent in the impossibility of recognizing that which is most properly our own except in others -- as a common, but obviously non-immanent factor among living beings. It is thus the revelation of a common otherness or finitude among us, and thus the impossibility of immanence (Van Den Abbeele xiv), which constitutes the basis of our commonality, not any recognition of our immanence and autonomy as Enlightenment models might contend. And it is the corpse (although not only the corpse) which reveals the non-essential basis of our being-together. As Nancy writes, "Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others" (15). The corpse exposes community as a being-together not of selves but of "others," each inscribed with its own unique finitude (i.e. self-difference) and bound together only by what George Van Den Abbeele calls "something we necessarily all share and yet cannot communicate: death, which is but Nancy's hyperbolic metaphor of the day-to-day finitude that marks the singularities of our being"
(xiv), and to which we are exposed, in the most heightened fashion, in the corpse. Community is thus not the product of an "intersubjective link" (Van Den Abbeele xiv) among immanent subjects: community takes place in the space hollowed out by the failure of such immanence; furthermore, its locus is not in any inaugural agreement among subjects but rather in the mute, liminal rupture we glimpse of that which we "necessarily all share and yet cannot communicate," a space more primordial than the immanent subject of the contractual model, or the "great Conduit" which serves as the instrument of human sociability, which is at once that which is most properly ours, yet always irretrievably other. Community consists in the failure of the possibility of human immanence; it is, perversely, that which, according to Nancy, "acknowledges and inscribes -- this is its peculiar gesture -- the impossibility of community" (15). It is here, at the limit of the thinkable, that we are brought back to the heart of Johnson's Dictionary.

5. "The Spawn of Folly": Community, Contingency, and Cant

The opening of the subject to the radical otherness which marks the coming-into-being of our commonality resembles, although is not identical to, the rupturing of the sign in the inaugural disruption of presence in utterance. In both cases, immanence is interrupted by a chance event -- Benveniste's "utterance" in the one instance, in the other, the death of the other -- which, because it is absolutely incommensurable with any determinate notion of the self, community, history, language, or whatever, marks a limit
to the thought of such phenomena. We have seen, for example, that Johnson's efforts
to realize his desire for a linguistic substance repeatedly, and in all of their various
guises, fail as they confront a limit which renders whatever totalized representation of
language he may develop, unstable. Death, in Johnson's text, is a common figure for
the failure to discover immanence, be it in the subject, in history, in positive conceptions
of community, or in language. The limit of this failure is the edge upon which Johnson's
text operates and which, in its various aspects, it exposes. It is not surprising, therefore--
particularly in terms of the importance Blanchot ascribes to the corpse--that in one of
the rare moments in the "Preface" or Plan when Johnson touches upon the relationship
between human community and language, figures of life and death once again come into
play. In their chiasmic oscillations, these figures adumbrate the limit which, common
to both, that is, inscribed in both as the mark of each one's difference from the other,
constitutes the condition of possibility of the apparent identity of each and the failure of
that identity to substantiate itself as a presence. As we shall see, this limit where life and
death play is common to community as well.

Johnson makes no explicit mention of the relationship between language and
human sociability in the Plan. The matter arises only in the final pages of the "Preface,"
and then it occurs tangentially in a discussion of cant words. Johnson broaches the topic
of cant in his defence of his decision to omit what in the Plan he refers to as certain
"classes of words" (7) from his Dictionary:
That many terms of art and manufacture are omitted must be frankly acknowledged; but for this defect I may boldly allege that it was unavoidable: I could not visit the warehouses of merchants, and shops of artificers, to gain the names of wares, tools and operations, of which no mention is found in books; what favourable accident, or easy enquiry brought within my reach, has not been neglected; but it had been a hopeless labour to glean up words, by courting living information, and contesting with the sullenness of one, and the roughness of another. (par. 78)\textsuperscript{13}

Clearly Johnson is not merely making excuses: to assemble the words of a language from the multitude of texts in which they appear and array them chronologically is in itself an almost unthinkable task for one person to accomplish, even if that person is assisted by a compliment of amanuenses as was Johnson.\textsuperscript{14} To expect the lexicographer to also venture from his library to record the discourse of the wide world of "living information" would be to demand a task which would require an legion of research assistants. Johnson notes, for example, that in preparing his \textit{Dictionary} he was less fortunate than those of the \textit{Accademia della Crusca} who, in order to familiarize themselves with the usage of words not readily found in texts but specific to particular economic activities enlisted the services of Michelangelo Buonaroti who "professedly" produced for them "a series of comedies called \textit{la Fiera}, or \textit{the Fair}" (par. 79). "I had no such assistant," Johnson comments dryly "and therefore was content to want what they must have wanted likewise, had they not luckily been so supplied" (par. 79). Johnson's \textit{Dictionary}, not surprisingly, is restricted by the economic limitations under which he laboured. Less determinate perhaps, but no less real than the economic limits imposed upon one compelled to work "without any patronage of the great" or "under the shelter of academick bowers" (par.
94) and indeed related to the economic in ways which we will in the next chapter explore, is the limit posed by that dimension of language which is inaccessible to cognition, representation, and saturation by method.

The features associated with this limit are curiously similar to those which Johnson identifies with a particular class of words which he decides to exclude from his Dictionary, and which he describes in justifying his decision to omit "many terms of art and manufacture" from his Dictionary. Johnson writes,

Nor are all words which are not found in the vocabulary, to be lamented as omissions. Of the laborious and mercantile part of the people, the diction is in a great measure casual and mutable, many of their terms are formed for some temporary or local convenience, and though current at certain times and places, are in others utterly unknown. This fugitive cant, which is always in a state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of a language, and therefore must be suffered to perish with other things unworthy of preservation. (par. 80)

Unlike that domain of language use Johnson elsewhere deems "legitimate" (Plan 16), cant is here distinguished by its radical contingency. Cant words arise and pass away as if by accident, "fugitives" with no apparent relation to the general organic development of a language. Lacking any discernible relation to an "original" (Plan 16) or original meaning, cant words derive their signification from the immediate context of their utterance -- the "temporary or local" circumstances of their formation and use -- not from the place that moment of utterance occupies in the unfolding life of the language to which it, as Johnson would have it, belongs only illegitimately. In this way, cant marks a dimension of language entirely other than that which Johnson identifies in the Plan as
"legitimate" (16). Cant words are "the spawn of folly or affectation, which arise from no just principles of speech, and of which therefore no legitimate derivation can be shewn" (16; emphasis added). Cant is the language of folly, that is, of a madness which will not be methodized and so must be excluded.

But although Johnson seems to take great pains to distinguish cant from those words for which "legitimate derivation can be shewn," the integrity of the two "classes of words" (7) is not absolute. In fact, as in our previous examples, a certain imbrication obtains between them which exposes in its overlap an indeterminate limit. Once again, the instability which emerges, here between different orders of discourse, finds its expression in the question of whether the "body" of language is alive or dead, a question with which cant, as the indeterminate other of the substantial, proper discourse which Johnson privileges, interrupts the totalizing effects of the Dictionary's organic method.

In our previous examples, the opening of immanence to difference is marked by figures of death. This is the case, for example, in the destruction of desire's dream of perfection on the rockface of performance and in the accident of disfiguration which transforms the living body of language, in need of palliation, into a corpse, requiring preservation. In disrupting the immanence of that which apparently transcends the work of "time and chance," each of these "accidents" places the self-identity of language into relation with something "other" than itself. In so doing, it exposes a space of difference which obtains not only between them but which is also, by virtue of their relationship,
necessarily inscribed within each of them in such a way as to render their own self-
identity heterogeneous.

In each of the instances I have described, the "other" has been identified with
madness, the accidental, the ephemeral, the capricious, and the disruptive -- precisely the
qualities which in our present example Johnson associates with cant. Cant, in other
words, occupies a space of radical contingency which in the other patterns we have seen
so far in the Plan and "Preface" is reserved for the unknowable, for "empty sound," for
the unrepresentable dimension of language indifferent to desires to signify, and
ultimately, for death. This is curious, however, because Johnson, we should recall,
refers to cant in the first passage from the "Preface" which I quoted in this section as
"living information" (par. 78), that is, he explicitly identifies cant with life. By "living
information" Johnson no doubt means that one would be more likely to overhear cant
words in the workplaces of the "laborious and mercantile part of the people" (par. 80)
than to read them in the pages of a book. In making such a claim, however, Johnson's
text reiterates the same play between the living and the dead as that which we saw in our
previous example: Johnson identifies cant with the "life" he associates with spoken
discourse; he also, however, characterizes this discourse in terms of the sort of
contingency which elsewhere in the Plan and "Preface" he associates with death, positing
cant as the capricious, arbitrary "other" of those words of "legitimate derivation" whose
continuous, organic development -- whose life -- he attempts to chart. Cant, it seems,
is not the simple other of legitimate language. As "other" it exposes a liminal dimension
of difference which obtains between itself and the domain of language use deemed "legitimate." In so doing, it necessarily destabilizes the integrity of both terms of that opposition. The limit exposed by the otherness of cant is adumbrated in the oscillation of the figures employed in its description. As its representation shifts between images of life and death, cant exposes a radical difference which inscribes itself not only in the space between such apparently determinate categories as legitimate and illegitimate discourse, or life and death, but within them as well: if "living" cant is in some way the other of this organically-determined, that is, living, language, then the integrity of life and death as stable categories of understanding has been profoundly disrupted. A strange space opens in which the two overlap and in so doing lose their identity: again, it is uncertain whether the body of language is living or dead.

But whether language is identified with life or death is not the point. What is most important is the intervention of difference in the form of a dimension of language --- here called cant -- which is utterly incommensurable with a conception of language as a determinate phenomenon. In its evanescence and contingency, cant marks the disruptive movement of difference, whose event and erasure is the condition of possibility of history -- the historicity of history, as it were. In view of this, Johnson's decision to allow cant "to perish with other things unworthy of preservation" (par. 80) may be seen to repeat that "final repression of différance" which Derrida has identified as the theme carried by the word "history" (SP 141). If we recall, Johnson appeals to the organic in order to recuperate diachronically the effect of substance and thus the stability he cannot
locate in words "themselves": in order to establish language as a determinate phenomenon, he transforms all of history into a thing. Cant, however, is incommensurable with Johnson's organic model of language. As the other of the deadweight of the aggregate of calculated moments which characterize the organic model of language, cant exposes precisely what Johnson invokes that model in order to repress: difference, and with it, language's finitude or fundamental lack of perfection. Cant opens a space of difference in language and exposes a limit beyond cognition which, although it marks the condition of possibility of discourse, is not a strictly linguistic space. As the passages I have quoted suggest, cant marks a locus which is common to both the linguistic and the social, but proper to neither. What we have yet to work out, however, are the limits and implications of this common element of difference.

Johnson associates cant with the contingency and disruption which elsewhere in the text is figured forth in images of death; he also, however, identifies this disruptive class of words with a particular social class: "the laborious and mercantile part of the people" (par. 80). As Olivia Smith has argued, social and political legitimacy at this time were coextensive with linguistic legitimacy: one's status before the political and juridical institutions of English society was determined to a large degree by the discourse one spoke. "To speak the vulgar language demonstrated that one belonged to the vulgar class; that is, that one was morally and intellectually unfit to participate in the culture" (2), writes Smith. Arbitrary as such a criterion may have been, it derived its legitimacy no doubt from the Enlightenment, and later, Romantic identification of language with
knowledge. As Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor have pointed out, such a connection, based on a particular misreading of Locke, maintained that "the language spoken by a community somehow reflects, even determines, the way that the members of that community think" (119). From this proposition it was not a difficult leap to the assumption that the discourse of particular classes provides a window on the cognitive abilities of the members of that class and thus the suitability of its members to positions of authority in the community. Thus, to deem the discourse of a particular class or classes "casual and mutable" (par. 80) as Johnson does in the "Preface" is implicitly to characterize the members of that group in the same terms. Similarly, to declare that the discourse of these groups "cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of language" (par. 80) is to represent members of those classes as minor players in a providentially-conceived, organically-driven history of the nation, a gesture which in turn justifies the exclusion of the language peculiar to the group from a legitimizing document such as the Dictionary.¹⁵

Such a body of assumptions, however, is possible only on the basis of a notion that human language and community share a common foundation in a subject whose identity is immanent. The immanence of the subject, along with that of the language he or she speaks, the society and class of which he or she is a member, and the history in which he or she play their roles depends, as we have seen in the case of history, on the adequate repression of the radical difference which is embodied in Johnson's representation of cant. In excluding cant from the Dictionary, Johnson represses that
dimension of language identified with contingency. Thematized as Derrida notes in the word "history," this repression is also crucial for the positing and maintenance of the determinate notions of the subject, language, and class concomitant with such a conception of history.

The contingency which manifests itself linguistically in cant, however, is not merely an accident of language, although this is the effect Johnson creates with the gesture in which he expels it from his text. Cant, rather, exposes a blank, incoherent limit which exceeds language conceived in terms of immanence, an imageless, liminal dimension beyond representation and cognition which is constitutive of but not reducible to discourse. This limit, which necessarily withdraws in the gesture in which its effects are shadowed forth, is not, however, exhausted in any proper name such as cant or by a category such as language. Viewed from the angle of another area of human activity, the radical contingency identified here with cant may well go under another name. For example, if we approach the passage in which Johnson characterizes cant from the perspective of class, not language, we find contingency (and thus death!) is identified with that social group Johnson calls "the laborious and mercantile part of the people." As such, the locus of the disruption shifts from the event of utterance to that of the activity which is constitutive of labour.
Chapter Five

The Inscription of Labour

Labour is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time.

— Karl Marx, Grundrisse

1. The Doubleness of Labour

In Marx's writings, labour is sometimes characterized by a non-self-identical quality similar to that which we have identified with utterance and which Johnson, in our previous example, associates with cant. This dimension of labour is exposed in the relationship between what Marx identifies as its aspect as an activity and as a locus of social relations. For Marx, to produce is to be human, and production or labour, by which in the following pages I mean a "value-creating practice" (Negri and Hardt 8), is necessarily inscribed in the network of social relations in which production takes place.

As E.K. Hunt explains in History of Economic Thought

In all societies, in all times, production was a social process of interdependent producers, organized socially to undertake the physical and mental exertions necessary to transform their natural environment in order to make that environment sustain human, social life. This interdependence and the resultant necessity for social coordination of labour meant that in all societies, labouring, or producing was both a set of activities and a set of social relations. (276)

What, since Saussure, structuralists and poststructuralists have said about the sign, holds also for labour: it exists, as Cynthia Chase says, "only insofar as it . . . enters into a
determinable relationship or system of relationships" (96). At the same time, the dual character of labour also implies, again in a manner similar to that which we have described in relation to the sign, a "moment" or space in which labour, in its aspect as activity, stands free from its social dimension. Such a space is impossible, of course: the two constitutive features of labour are as inseparable as the two sides of a sheet of paper. And yet, without that space, which we identified earlier with "work," labour would be unrecognizable as such -- a thoroughly determinate phenomenon in which all activities and social relations were calculated in advance and, as such, were closed to the possibility of any real transformations or decisions. The differential event which brings labour into being and which we might call the inscription of labour, opens a space in labour which renders it different from itself, prohibiting what Derrida in a discussion of "spacing" calls "its coincidence with itself" (Positions 94). Entirely arbitrary, identifiable with neither the specific activity to which it gives rise, nor the web of social relations in which that activity is enmeshed, this work of labour, like the event of utterance, is radically indeterminate and, as such, beyond representation.

Marx suggests something of the essential indeterminateness of labour in the Grundrisse where he claims "Labour is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time" (361). Labour, in other words, abstracted from whatever social matrix may provide it with its specific form in a given historical context, is characterized by a evanescence strangely similar to that which Johnson distinguishes in the discourse of the "laborious and mercantile part of the
people." This resemblance, however, is not so much a coincidence as it is an indication of the incoherent space or rupture which is common to both labour and language prior to their respective determination, whether in social production or in discourse. It is the incoherence of the space marked by this transitoriness, moreover, which Johnson's text seeks to efface: like Shakespeare's Antony, the text puts "a tongue / In every wound" which that space exposes. When those tongues speak, however, it is only to deny that they have been imposed upon a mute, cadaverous blankness, an unintelligible caesura which in its indeterminateness is the locus of political decision and thus of power. Johnson's text ventriloquiizes that space, palliating its capacity to disrupt human pretensions to knowledge while, with the same gesture, determining the form of both language and labour. The two are inseparable in Johnson's text. We have already discussed at some length the nature of this effacement as it occurs in relation to language. In order to do so from the perspective of labour, where there is some disagreement as to the actual figure which is most appropriate for labour's indeterminateness and for its relationship to the context in which it occurs, a short diversion into Marxist thought and specifically Marx's labour theory of value is necessary.
Diversion 5: Labour

Economist Diane Elson notes that, in its fundamental indeterminateness, labour is "a fluidity, a potential, which in any society has to be socially 'fixed' or objectified in the production of particular goods, by particular people in particular ways" (128). To "fix" labour, in effect, is to efface the radical incoherence of the event which inaugurates the coming-into-being of labour with the form imposed upon that space by the system of relationships which constitutes the social context in which it takes place. For example, in the precapitalist economies of Western Europe, labour power -- that is, potential (and, as we shall see, potentially disruptive) labour or capacity for labour -- was "fixed" by a rigidly hierarchal social structure in which religion, custom, and tradition dictated the relations of production including the forms of activity which were recognized as labour (again, by which we mean any activity productive of value). With the rise of industrial capitalism, however, already exerting its first influences in Johnson's day, labour's radical fluidity, largely invisible in the static set of feudal social relations, was suddenly exposed. Displaced from the land which had once been theirs to work, the serfs were transformed into the wage-earner or proletariat with nothing to exchange for sustenance but his or her potential for labour -- labour power -- which the capitalist purchased. Once fixed in the system of "mutual obligations and services" which obtained "up and down the hierarchy" of serf, vassal, lord, over-lord and king (Hunt 8), labour was now determined by the capricious workings of the marketplace.2
Under capitalism, labour assumes a particular form which Marx called abstract social labour. To understand the significance of abstract social labour for our reading of Johnson, it is necessary to look briefly at Marx's labour theory of value. For Marx, the main economic activity under capitalism is the production of commodities -- goods produced exclusively for exchange. Unlike feudalism where the products of human labour were often simply appropriated by those further up the hierarchy in a system of exploitation "justified by feudal or even divine right" (Fine 21), commodities in a capitalist economy are freely exchanged in the marketplace. Exchange under capitalism, however, does not take place directly between producers: the only "contact" among producers in a capitalist economy is through the market where those exchanges are mediated by a special commodity which, by representing the values of commodities "as magnitudes of the same denomination, qualitatively equal, and quantitatively comparable ... serves as a universal measure of value" (Capital 94). That special commodity is money. In order to function as a universal equivalent of value, however, money must represent a quality or "substance" which is common to all commodities. That substance is labour: "It is because all commodities, as values, are realized human labour, and therefore commensurable, that their values can be measured by one and the same special commodity, and the latter to be converted into the common measure of their values, i.e., into money" (Capital 1:94). Unlike previous economists who had maintained that a commodity's value was determined by its utility (its "use value"), Marx argued that a commodity's relative value was a function of the labour time required for its production.
After all, he argued, there was nothing in a use-value which allowed it to be compared quantitatively with another use value: that would be to compare apples and oranges, in some cases, quite literally. On the other hand, as a measure of the ratio in which commodities may be exchanged for one another on the market, exchange value marks a dimension of the commodity which is purely quantitative and which thus allows comparison. Stripping the commodity of the physical properties which give it its use value, Marx finds that what remains is "human labour in the abstract" (Capital 1:44). The quasi-scientific figures with which he describes this fundamental "social substance" are strangely reminiscent of the atomic prime matter which Johnson desired to recuperate for language with the Dictionary. Marx writes that when we consider the "residue" which remains when we "leave out of consideration the use-value of commodities," we find that

it consists of the same unsubstantial reality in each, a mere conglomeration of homogeneous human labour, of labour-power expended without regard to the mode of its expenditure. All that these things now tell us is, that human labour-power has been expended in their production, that human labour is embodied in them. When looked at as crystals of this social substance, common to them all, they are -- Values. (Capital 1:38).

Labour-time determines value. But it is a particular type of labour. Obviously value cannot literally be based on the precise amount of labour spent in the production of a commodity: if that were the case, the commodities produced by the least efficient producers would fetch the highest prices. Labour-time, rather, indicates that the time "required to produce an article under normal conditions of production, and with the
average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time" (I:39). Furthermore, the labour which determines value is not the labour which produces a specific use value -- that is, what Marx calls useful or concrete labour; rather, it is labour abstracted from any connection to the qualitative or useful aspect of its product:

Productive activity, if we leave out of sight its special form, viz. the useful character of the labour, is nothing but the expenditure of human labour-power. . . . The value of a commodity represents human labour in the abstract, the expenditure of human labour in general (Capital I:44).

Thus it is this abstract social labour, labour in its purely quantitative or general dimension -- what Marx refers to as "homogeneous human labour, expenditure of one uniform labour-power" (I:39) -- which is at once the producer and measure of value. Abstract social labour is the common substance of value. (Whether this common substance is any more determinate than the substance which Johnson desires to locate in language is a question we will reserve for the moment.)

As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt explain in Labour of Dionysus, the homogeneity of abstract labour provides a means of calculating the distribution of labour-power throughout the various sectors of social production, thereby illuminating "the capitalist processes of valorization" (8). Here it is important to note that abstract labour and thus value is created only when the commodity in which labour-power is actualized is exchanged on the market for money, price being the empirical form of abstract labour. Furthermore, as the purchaser of that special, value-producing commodity, labour-power, the capitalist has little interest in useful labour -- labour productive of use values. His
or her interest rests with abstract labour, the creator of exchange value. Accordingly, the capitalist will transfer the labour-power he or she purchases into whatever sector of production is most likely to yield value. Abstract labour thus serves, in this version of Marx's labour theory of value, as what Negri and Hardt describe as a "figure of equilibrium" (8) by means of which capitalism, a mode of production without any central regulating agent, allocates labour-power where it is most needed:

One of the principal functions of this law of value is to make clear that in a society of producers of commodities, while there is no centralization or coordination, there is the means of making social choices -- there is an order. The law of value reveals the rationality that underlies the operations that capitalists conduct blindly in the market. It thus attempts to explain the maintenance of social equilibrium within the tumult of accidental fluctuations. (8)

Despite its explanatory force, however, this version of the labour theory of value has the unfortunate effect of effacing the profoundly disruptive nature of labour's indeterminateness and thus, as we shall see, neutralizing the possibility of empowerment which resides in the space of labour. While it is true that the globality of abstract labour allows it to be channelled from sector to sector within the system of social production, to suggest that the indeterminateness of labour may be exhausted by distribution alone is to ascribe a dimension of immanence to the structure of distribution -- the context of labour -- which (as our prior discussion of context should suggest) is unwarranted. As Diane Elson points out, "The question of why labour takes the form it does is not simply a distributional question," that is, a matter of "the way in which individuals are distributed and linked together in a pre-given structure of tasks" (124). Although this
may be the view of such prominent Marxists as I.I. Rubin and Louis Althusser, such a
position elides the reciprocally conditioning nature of the dialectical relationship between
labour and a structure of distribution which cannot be described as immanent (that is,
given in advance) and which Marx describes in *The German Ideology*:

> The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life
> process of definite individuals. . . . of individuals, not as they may appear
> in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; *i.e.* as
> they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite
> material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will
> (qtd. in Elson 129).

This passage suggests what the figure of equilibrium elides: the structure of social
production in which labour occurs is not simply a matrix of the various forms which
labour may assume in that system; rather, labour and the structure of production are
mutually imbricated and reciprocally determining aspects of a dynamic process in which
no element is "pre-given," or exterior to another. We could say, in fact, that the liminal
movement which "actualizes" each -- in the form of a commodity in the one case, in that
of a determinate distributional structure in the other -- is *necessarily* the same movement
in which the inaugural disruption of presence and opening of a differential space common
to labour and the social withdraws. Clearly, the radical indeterminateness which the
"fluidity" of labour marks exceeds any apparently "pre-given" structure which might
contain or determine it. Although such a structure of social production may determine
labour (and again, I emphasize, labour here is defined as "what counts as value-creating
practice" [Negri and Hardt 9]), labour harbours a capacity -- incommensurable with such
gestures of determination --to intervene in that structure, disrupting its apparent immanence and, in so doing, actually interposing in the determination of labour, thus determining itself as labour. The relationship between labour and the structure which determines certain activities as labour is a two-way, not a one-way street. No simple "figure of equilibrium" (Negri and Hardt 8) in a "pre-given" structure which lies exterior to it, labour is therefore revealed as what Negri and Hardt describe as "an antagonistic figure, as the subject of a dynamic rupture of the system" (8-9). As rupture, labour loses even the minimal degree of identity which would allow it the substantiality of a fluid. Rather, any such identity could only be an effect of the resistance labour (or what we may only improperly call "labour" and what I have been referring to as "work") poses to itself in the inaugural movement of disruption and effacement in which it, along with the structure by which it is "determined," are posited. Without any determinate identity, work is a blank space whose shape is ultimately defined only in its effacement (as "labour"). As such, labour is a site of conflict, a point which Negri and Hardt make in their remark that, "the very concept of labour is mobile and historically defined through contestation" (9).

The radical indeterminateness of labour becomes apparent in capitalism in a way which it does not in feudalism. As Diane Elson explains, although "human labour is fluid, requiring determination, in all states of society," only with the rise of industrial economies does "the fluidity of labour become immediately apparent," this "because the jobs that individuals do [under this new system] are obviously not completely determined
by 'tradition,' religion, family ties, etc., and individuals do quite frequently change the jobs they do" (128). But this fluidity of labour exposes, in its turn (and in a manner more thoroughly effaced in the more rigid structures of feudal society) labour's fundamental lack of identity and thus the threat of disruption which it necessarily poses to the apparent stability and coherence of the system of social production in which it takes place. It is here that we may find an explanation for Johnson's decision to bar "cant" words from his Dictionary.

2. Exuberance and Exploitation: Cant and the Division of Labour

Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work of nought.

-Isaiah, (from Johnson's definitions of nothing and nought).

"Fugitive cant," as Johnson calls it, is characterized by an instability similar to that which I have identified with our revised concept of labour: where cant, for example, is described as "casual and mutable," labour is "fluid." In their indeterminateness, however, both also expose a fundamental lack or interval utterly incommensurable with the coherency of the phenomenon in which that space is exposed, in the one case, in language, in the other, in labour. Nor is it certain that the lack each marks is properly the space of "language" or "labour." Rather, both seem to point to a limit which, whether we place it under the proper name of language or labour (or under community or death for that matter), marks the incoherent, blank space, the effacement of which
brings such phenomena as "language" and "labour" into being. As a non-self-identical space opened with a rupture in presence, however, the liminal dimension of such phenomena also marks the fundamental relation of difference which obtains among them and which, in a peculiar, negative sense, they could be said to have in common. The identity of all phenomena and concepts is ultimately an effect of their diversion through this liminal, alterior space, which does not exist as such and yet in which all are imbricated, traced by their difference from the other, and because of which all coming-into-being is necessarily also a being-in-common.

It is curious, for example, that cant, which Johnson describes as the most fluid, least determinate order of discourse, should be identified with precisely that "laborious and mercantile part of the people" whose "rise" coincided with that of industrial capitalism and thus with the exposure of the fluidity of labour. At mid-century, when Johnson was at work on his Dictionary, the organization of English industry was undergoing profound change. Population was expanding and with it grew not only the domestic market but also the pool of free labour. As J.H. Plumb has noted, "the mass of London's population, the hordes of labourers whose livelihood depended almost entirely on casual employment and who were liable to be dismissed at will" (16), and whose despair might be transformed into riot by the eloquence of any "unscrupulous politician," comprised a threatening presence in English society, one which, Plumb goes on to observe, all political parties agreed, "justified the savage intensification of the laws dealing with crimes against property" (17). Such changes in the organization of industry
and the forms of labour which fed into it were coextensive, moreover, with England's rapid development as a commercial society. As Johnson himself observed in his preface to Richard Rolt's *Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, published in 1756, one year after the *Dictionary*, "It may be properly observed that there was never, from the earliest ages, a time in which trade so much engaged the attention of mankind, or commercial gain was sought with such general emulation" (qtd. in Woodman 87). But while Johnson may have nodded approvingly in the direction of the *laissez-faire* ethos of Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), his endorsement of commercial expansion was tempered with some very prescient reservations. For example, in *Further Thoughts on Agriculture*, published the same year as his remarks in Rolt's *Dictionary*, Johnson represents the commercial spirit of the age as a mistress every bit as mercurial as the canting discourse with which, in the *Dictionary*, she is associated:

Commerce, however we may please ourselves with the contrary opinion, is one of the daughters of fortune, inconstant and deceitful as her mother; she chooses her residence where she is least expected, and shifts her abode, when her continuance is in appearance most firmly settled. (qtd. in Greene 283)

Although Johnson does not explicitly acknowledge the potential of the "laborious and mercantile part of the people" to intervene in and disrupt the stability of the system of social production which they were already revolutionizing, he does, later in the "Preface," draw a connection between language change and the class distinctions which emerge with the division of labour, a link which suggests a relationship between linguistic "innovation" and social change.
Johnson opens his speculations with a description of the social conditions he imagines must be in place if a language is to be fixed:

The language most likely to continue long without alteration, would be that of a nation raised a little, and but a little, above barbarity, secluded from strangers, and totally employed in procuring the conveniencies of life; either without books, or, like some of the Mahometan countries, with very few: men thus busied and unlearned, having only such words as common use requires, would perhaps long continue to express the same notions by the same signs. (par. 87)

With this passage, Johnson establishes a relationship between work and language: as long as people derive their sustenance through a system of social production in which labour is distributed more-or-less equally among the members of the community (the male members, at least, for there is no mention of women here), and provided there are no dealings with other cultures, language will remain fixed. In a state of primitive communism, communality of labour demands a communality of language in which there is little need or possibility for linguistic innovation or change:

But no such constancy can be expected in a people polished by arts, and classed by subordination, where one part of the community is sustained and accommodated by the labour of the other. Those who have much leisure to think, will always be enlarging the stock of ideas, and every increase of knowledge, whether real or fancied, will produce new words, or combinations of words. (par 87)

Once labour is divided and social relations are characterized by the domination of one group by another, language change begins. Although it is obviously not the discourse Johnson uses, his speculations suggest that language change is a function of the appropriation by one group of the surplus value generated by the labour of another.
What Johnson calls the "exuberance" of a language (par. 3) is thus crudely proportional to the degree of that exploitation.

Johnson's words, however, also carry with them a warning of sorts, a vague insinuation that such exploitation bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Although the leisured class may, by way of its exploitation of other groups, enjoy the privilege of expanding "the stock of ideas" and thus the language, there is no guarantee or safeguard in place to ensure that they will do so prudently. Affluence breeds excess and caprice, and a capricious language, Johnson informs us, is a language in decline. With the language falls the authority of those who speak it in the form which they deem most "legitimate" for, as Johnson makes clear in his final words on the relationship between language and labour, "speech" and "practice" are indissociable:

When the mind is unchained from necessity, it will range after convenience; when it is left at large in the fields of speculation, it will shift opinions; as any custom is disused, the words that expressed it must perish with it; as any opinion grows popular it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice. (par 87)

The fact of cant suggests that the ruling elite is not the only group capable of linguistic innovation -- indeed, change (represented negatively in the "Preface" as the absence of durability) is the hallmark of cant and the name in which Johnson condemns it. With the rise of industrial capitalism in eighteenth-century Britain and the valorization of new forms of productive activities (particularly those of the "laborious and mercantile part of the people") which accompanied it, the hegemony which the elite had once enjoyed, including its influence over language, was eroded. "Speech" and "practice" are linked
in Johnson's text: as such, any erosion of the elite's influence over language would be accompanied, according to Johnson's model, by a diminution of their ability to "alter" or perhaps more precisely, to maintain "practice," in this case, the specific practices responsible for the relations of social production which had granted them their position of social superiority and with it, the authority to determine which activities by which groups of people in their society did and did not constitute "labour," that is, which activities were deemed productive of value. As Negri and Hardt explain

What counts as labour, or value-creating practice, always depends on the existing values of a given social and historical context, in other words, labour should not simply be defined as activity, any activity, but specifically activity that is socially recognized as productive of value. The definition of what practices comprise labour is not given or fixed, but rather historically and socially determined, and thus the definition itself constitutes a mobile site of social contestation. (9)

If, as Johnson suggests, there is a relationship between "speech" and "practice" (or to put it in the terms which I have been using, that language and labour share a common difference which is proper to neither), then it would seem that there must be a discursive dimension to the "definition" of labour. But, if this is the case, the Dictionary can hardly be seen as a neutral player in the social conflict which Negri and Hardt describe. Rather, we would have to say that along with the providing the meanings of its 40,000 headwords, Johnson's Dictionary also defines what does and does not constitute value-producing activity, that is, labour. Not surprisingly, the primary sort of activity which Johnson determines as value producing is his own.
3. Labour and Language: the Lexicographical Crux

In *The Plan of a Dictionary* as well as in the "Preface," the fate of labour, and particularly lexicographical labour, is intertwined in complex ways with that of language. So all-involving is their relationship that the determination of either lexicography or language as a self-identical phenomenon is possible only by way of the effacement in the other of the wound of difference which is common to both. Language thus appears as a determinate and stable phenomenon in the text only insofar as the text effaces the fundamental indeterminateness of lexicographical labour. Similarly, lexicography emerges as a determinate, value-producing activity only to the extent that the text obliterates language's radical lack of substance. To put this another way, we might say that Johnson is able to determine and thus legitimize his labour only by establishing a coherent identity for language or, barring that, by creating the effect of or simulating such an identity, which he does by effacing the liminal dimension of language with organic tropes. Obversely, Johnson may offer language as a determinate phenomenon only insofar as he is able to efface the disruptive dimension of labour, that is, the manner in which his work as lexicographer actually intervenes in the system of social production, thereby contributing to its own self-valorization as "labour."

In its complexity, this chiasmic formulation adumbrates a space of radical difference, a limit common to both labour and language and yet ultimately disruptive to the identity or "definition" of each. Nowhere is their mutual involution more apparent than in Johnson’s definition of the word which designates his activity, "lexicography,"
and the product of that uncertain process, "dictionary." It is crucial to Johnson's project that he adequately define these words: as we have seen, Johnson contends that the meanings of both terms, and thus the expectations which they raise, are vague and misleading precisely because of a deficiency on the part of their referents: lexicography has failed to close the gap adequately and thus to limit the play between words and their referents and nowhere is this slack more in evidence than in the "miscellaneous" (Plan 5) ideas to which the word "dictionary" itself gives rise in the minds of those who read it. We have noted that Johnson describes lexicography early in the Plan as a nebulous activity which yields a heterogeneous range of products and desires. What is known about lexicography -- that it is a dull task, "drudgery for the blind," "the proper toil of artless industry" (1), and so on -- seems not to be based on any experience of the activity itself, but is rather the consequence of "opinion" (2), the source of which, whether in "truth and nature" or "accident and prejudice" (2), Johnson observes, is not immediately clear. What is evident in Johnson's view, however, is the fact that lexicographers must bear some measure of responsibility for the lack of precision surrounding the public perception of their activity and the generally low esteem in which their work is held. If the perception of lexicography as a form of value-producing activity has suffered in the eyes of the public it is, in other words, because lexicographers have not sufficiently determined their labour, a shortcoming which is reflected in the confusion and error surrounding ideas of the nature of their product. Until they do so, Johnson suggests, the word "dictionary" will continue to be a site of exuberant desire and vain wishes, a space
of conflict vulnerable to the phantoms of imagination, and lexicography will remain an activity of questionable character and indeterminate value.

Such a desire to establish the bounds of lexicography is in keeping with the ethos of literary professionalization which critics often cite in discussing Johnson's life and work. In the England of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the emoluments of literary production were to be eked from the marketplace, not the court. As the caprice of the patron gave way to that of the bookseller and reading public, Johnson emerges as a new type of writer, fiercely independent and anxious to establish his as a trade worthy of both respect and recompense in the expanding capitalist economy. The same holds true for Johnson the lexicographer. In the stinging rebuke of his letter to the Dictionary's delinquent patron Lord Chesterfield, critics commonly hear the death-knell of aristocratic patronage. But between the "outward rooms" of Chesterfield's favour on which Johnson turns his back and the public to which he would in consequence turn for the "censure" or "praise" which he perhaps somewhat incredibly claims in the "Preface" is of little concern to him, there is a wide space in which the fundamental indeterminateness and fluidity of his labour is laid bare. It is in this space that Johnson seeks to construct a text in which it will be possible for the public to recognize his efforts as labour.

The determination of the lexicographer's labour is bound up with the possibility of fixing meanings, above all, those of "lexicography" and "dictionary." If lexicography is to be determined as a specific type of activity, productive of a particular sort of good
and thus "socially recognized as productive of value" (Negri and Hardt 9) -- that is, if it is to be determined as labour -- it must be able to fix its own character in its product, literally. A number of difficulties become apparent at this point, however, all relating to the fundamental lack of self-identity which we have said characterizes both labour and language. As I have noted, labour is radically indeterminate, deriving its form only from its relation to the particular system of social production in which it takes place. By the same token, however, the system of social production is itself no more self-identical than the various forms of labour with which it is coextensive. As a determinate form of "work," labour, we have said, comes into being through a "dynamic rupture" in the system of production (Negri and Hardt 9). But because that system ultimately consists of nothing but various forms of labour the system must itself be radically indeterminate. Therefore, while the various forms of labour may derive their identity from their relation to the system of social production, they do so ultimately only in the broader --indeed, limitless -- context of a ubiquitous and perpetual disruption of that system: in the final analysis, the system has no other identity except the simulation of such which emerges with the effacement or withdrawal of the dynamic disruption which I have identified with work. The relation between labour and the system of social production, in other words, is not that of two determinate phenomena, or even of one which serves as the matrix of some "other." Both give shape to one another, effacing in a reciprocally constitutive movement of mutual supplementation the lack of self-identity which is fundamental to each. The lack, we might say, is hidden or withdraws by way of a reference to that
which it is not, a reference which, in its diversion through the other, generates the mirage that there is a "real" to which reference might be and has been made. As such, the "real" (what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreal," or the "simulacra" [Simulations 1-79]) is the effect of a movement of reference which conceals that there is no real to which reference might be made, a simulation of a "real" which is unavailable to cognition. The obliteration of lack, however, is never absolute: as we have seen and will see again, the movement of concealment has the paradoxical effect of disclosing the disruptive work which constitutes the limit of all apparently self-identical phenomena.

In Johnson's Dictionary language displaces the system of social production as the "other" of labour. As such, labour and language determine one another reciprocally in the text, effacing by way of their imbricated relationship -- i.e., the diversionary detour of each through the other -- the lack which is fundamental to both. Despite the thematization of the lexicographical process in the Plan and "Preface," Johnson does not re-present his labour in the text: he simulates it, obliterating the lack which is essential to his or any human work by way of a diversion through another, no less indeterminate concept, that is, through language. His simulation of labour, in other words, is necessarily coextensive with the diversionary process by which he ascribes a determinate, organic identity to language.

As the site where labour and language seem to blur together, Johnson's definition of "lexicography" is therefore crucial to the efficacy of his project as a whole -- and crucial in the most etymologically-precise sense of that word. "Lexicography" marks the
locus of the chiasmic exchange between labour and language in which each effaces the
indeterminateness of the other, lending the other the effect of substance which it lacks on
its own. Such effects, however, are just that and, as such, always provisional, always
subject to the capricious disruptions of the lack they seek to obliterate. If, for example,
lexicography is to be recognized as labour it must, by definition, be able to supply a
complete representation of itself in the pages of that which is its product. Such a
possibility implies, however, that the operations and effects of language are reducible,
without excess, to the paraphrastic, something which Johnson's reliance on quotation and
etymology suggests is not the case. Similarly, if language did possess the sort of positive
materiality and identity which would allow Johnson to realize his original desire to "limit
every idea by a definition strictly logical, and exhibit every production of art or nature
in an accurate description" (par. 72), the labour of lexicography would be as calculated
an exercise as taking an image with a brass rubbing. If, however, the things of the world
lent themselves to such transcription, a dictionary would hardly be necessary: things and
ideas would bear the imprint of their identities -- their signatures -- upon themselves for
all to read and know as they had once for Adam. The possibility of a dictionary,
therefore, depends on the impossibility that Johnson might realize his desire to exhaust
meaning and thus fix the language: again we see, the dictionary is possible only insofar
as it fails.

This failure is nowhere more apparent in Johnson's conception of language than
in those words which he identifies with cant. In its utterly historical character, cant
exposes a dimension of language which exceeds and defies the dream of comprehensivity which guides Johnson's lexicography. Cant implies, moreover, the impossibility that lexicography may ever adequately define even itself and thus comprehend its own limits. It is in this sense, that Johnson's declaration that the "one great end" of his dictionary "is to fix the English language" (11) marks the displacement of a desire to substantiate his own work as "productive of value" (Negri and Hardt 9). Only by establishing, or at least by creating an effect of having established, the possibility of fixing language is Johnson able to posit his work as labour -- as a socially valuable activity. Johnson suggests the nature of that value in the connection he explicitly draws between the fate of a language and that of the nation to which it belongs. "Tongues, like governments," he writes in the "Preface," "have a natural tendency to degeneration: we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language" (par. 91; emphasis added). The invocation of the organic as a quality common to both language and society, combined with the suggestion of a relationship between "speech" and "practice," allows Johnson to proclaim the fundamental importance of a stable language to the well-being of a nation and thus, implicitly, the crucial role which a comprehensive and authoritative dictionary plays in such a "struggle." (Joseph Priestley, as we will see, will make a similar argument although from a less conservative point of view). This self-legitimating gesture, in turn, provides the Dictionary with the authority to pick and choose among the discourses it surveys, determining on the basis of the apparent "durability" of the words which characterize each of them, and thus the type of labour with which those discourses
are associated, which are of value and which expendable. In so doing, Johnson demonstrates the lexicographer's worth as an adjudicator not only of linguistic value but also of the productive activities in his society which may be deemed valuable -- i.e. as labour.

But Johnson's call to arms in defence of language and nation is also a diversion of sorts which, in its organic representation of the two, effaces the radically non-self-identical dimension common to both, and with it the fundamentally unfixed character of all labour, including his own. This limit, which operates in all fields, yet only as the space of their difference, and which interrupts the identity of each precisely as that difference, must be obliterated if those fields -- "tongues," labour, "governments, what have you" -- are to materialize as determinate phenomena. In excluding cant from the *Dictionary*, Johnson pushes this incoherent aspect of language and labour to the margins of his text. In doing so, however, he promises a durability and stability for language which that text cannot deliver. For cant is not the problem. Cant merely exposes a contingent, arbitrary, and relative aspect of language -- language's historical dimension -- which runs like a thread, winding in and out of view through all of the concepts and phenomena of which it is constitutive, including that of an organically continuous history -- a history "caught up in representation" (Godzich xvii) -- which forms the basis of Johnson's notion of lexical durability. As the condition of possibility of the thought of such concepts, the contingency associated with cant constitutes a necessary excess which
cannot be eliminated, obliterated, or exhausted, but which continues to exert pressure on any gesture which seeks to repress or deny its necessary ground-work.\textsuperscript{45}


\ldots Words, by their immediate Operation on us, cause no other Ideas, but of their natural Sounds \ldots

Locke,\textit{ Essay}, IV, xviii, 3

 Lexicography thus emerges in the \textit{Dictionary} as a determinate activity -- that is, as labour -- on the basis of Johnson's elision of the contingent dimension of language which he identifies with cant. In constructing cant as a category of language defined by its ephemerality and dependency upon context for meaning and then excluding that category as illegitimate, as not properly language, Johnson is able to posit a "legitimate" other of cant, an order of language with a "durable" semantic core and thus a positive identity which, like a substance, endures over time and through multiple contexts. A language so reduced -- impossibly reduced, we might say -- offers itself as a determinate phenomenon which might be exhausted and thus fixed by a lexicographical activity which is strictly descriptive. In declaring that it is his job as lexicographer not to "form, but register the language," not to "teach men how they should think, but relate how they have hitherto expressed their thoughts" (par. 75), Johnson effaces that indeterminate or non-
positive, dimension of his labour which involves the active exclusion from his text of
certain discourses associated with particular areas of productive activity, and thus actually
intervenes not only in the language but also, by implicitly associating the "fugitive"
qualities of that discourse with the legitimacy of those who speak it and the productive
activities in which they engage, in the system of social production with which that
language is coextensive.

But clearly the effacement and naturalization of this disruptive dimension of
Johnson's work as lexicographer is itself a fundamental aspect of that work. As such,
we might say that the work of lexicography in Johnson's Dictionary consists not so much
in registering the language as it does in effacing that aspect of itself which actually
intervenes in the field of its subject so as
to posit that field as a determinate phenomenon which might be "registered," and thus to
posit itself as that which might register that field. In short, the work of lexicography in
Johnson's Dictionary consists in the valorization of itself as labour. In eliding as
illegitimate and therefore outside the bounds of its project that dimension of language,
identified with cant, which exceeds description, Johnson simulates an object proper to
lexicography. In doing so, however, he also elides that aspect of his work which
intervenes in that object, excluding that incoherent and unrepresentable dimension of
language which would undermine the possibility of a strictly descriptive lexicographical
practice. Lexicography, so determined, is thus the effect of the effacement of its own
impossibility: it emerges as a determinate practice only by way of the elision of that
dimension of its object of study which is not reducible to interpretability and which thus may not be paraphrased. Johnson declares what is and is not language proper and posits lexicography as the study of that object. In doing so, however, he elides the fact that labour and language are reciprocally and simultaneously determined in the erasure of the indeterminate liminal dimension common to both which such a declaration enacts.

At the same time that it is effaced, however, the incoherence of that limit continues to exert its force, disrupting every strategy Johnson employs to discover the substance which language promises it possesses. For example, in constructing the object of his labour as a determinate phenomenon, Johnson posits language as a thing which is reducible, without excess or residue, to sheer interpretability -- to paraphrase. And yet, as we have seen, Johnson's various attempts to determine a meaning substance which might serve as the basis for fixing language, whether by paraphrasis or the organic model of linguistic coherency invoked in the *Dictionary*'s use of etymology and historically sequential illustrative quotations, confront the inscrutable limits of language's intelligibility and coherency.

In Chapter Three, I noted Johnson's observation that, as a method of definition, the paraphrastic reduction of a word into "terms less abstruse" (par. 43) inevitably encounters such an impasse. Johnson claims a word's meaning is only reducible as far as those least abstruse terms, identified with simple ideas which he notes "cannot be described" (par. 43) and, as such, are "too plain to admit a definition" (par. 43). Beyond this limit, necessarily inscribed in all words, language's capacity to represent its own
meanings breaks down and a different manner of "definition" takes place: beyond this limit, meanings are not known by interpretation or paraphrase but only by a process which Johnson compares to intuition. As I commented when I first mentioned this matter in Chapter Three, in suggesting that signification is grounded ultimately in intuition, Johnson attributes the resistance which the lexicographer experiences at the limit of language not to the determinate presence of a positive meaning substance but rather to the event (or "pure, material occurrence" [Clark, "Monstrosity" 283]) in which the individual experiences the signification of a particular word. If the individual's knowledge of the meanings of words is not innate, that understanding must at some point be based -- at least in the case of those simple ideas which "cannot be described" (par. 43) and of which all other compound meanings are comprised -- on an experience in which the simple idea is brought into conjunction with the appropriate signifier. In "Locke's Theory of Language and Johnson's Dictionary," Elizabeth Hedrick observes that Johnson defines many simple ideas (or what she calls, those ideas "given in experience" [438]) in the Dictionary according to the method Locke describes in Book Three of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Locke remarks that the "only sure way" to define the word for a simple idea is by pointing to something which might "produce" that idea in the mind of the person for whom the definition is intended. Locke writes

... when a man makes use of the name of any simple idea, which he perceives is not understood, or is in danger to be mistaken, he is obliged, by the laws of ingenuity and the end of speech, to declare his meaning, and make known what idea he makes it stand for. This, as has been shown, cannot be done by definition; and therefore, when a synonymous
word fails to do it, there is but one of these ways left. First, sometimes the **naming** the subject wherein that simple idea is to be found will make its name to be understood by those who are acquainted with the subject, and know it by that name. . . . Secondly, but the only sure way of making known the signification of the name of any simple idea is by presenting to his senses that subject which may produce it in his mind, and make him actually have the idea that word stands for. (III, xi, 14)

The final resort of those seeking to define the words for simple ideas -- and thus the zero-degree of all definition -- is, as we saw in our earlier discussion of Locke, to **point** to that to which the word in question refers. Hedrick argues that, in defining the words for simple ideas, Johnson follows Locke's suggestion:

> he names for the reader an object in which the simple idea is to be found. For "yellow" Johnson's definition is "being of a bright, glaring colour, as gold," and "red" is "of the colour of blood, of one of the primitive colours, which is subdivided into many; as scarlet, vermilion, crimson." (427)

What is of crucial interest here is not so much Johnson's apparent adoption of Locke's suggested practice as the fact that, in order to define these minimal units of sense which are themselves beyond paraphrase, the lexicographer must point. The most basic experience of meaning, it thus seems, occurs by way of an event which is radically unstable and which, in that instability, exposes the unrepresentable liminality of language: the event of deixis.
5. Between Here and Nowhere: The Lexicographer's Nightmare

Discussing words with words is as entangled and interlocking as rubbing the fingers with the fingers, where it may scarcely be distinguished, except by the one who does it, which fingers itch and which give aid to the itching.

— St. Augustine, De Magisto

I am not answerable for all the words in my dictionary.

— Samuel Johnson

Meaning, then, as Johnson represents it in the Dictionary, is grounded in a gesture which is fundamentally deictical: the simple ideas which in their various combinations comprise the signifieds of all words are definable ultimately only by way of an experience in which objects manifesting those ideas are pointed out to the language learner in conjunction with the appropriate signifiers. By this formulation, the fundamental gesture in the definition of the colour gold, for example, would be the statement, "This is gold," uttered in the presence of something possessing the simple idea identified with that word. But because a deictical gesture is crucial to its performance, such an act of definition cannot be expected to provide the sort of positive basis for fixing the language as that for which Johnson is searching. As we have seen, the radical fungibility of deictics suggests that, despite their apparent capacity to refer to the world (along with the attendant implication that the world is intuitable), that reference ultimately points to nothing more substantial than the event of its own taking place, a moment which we have identified with utterance. While this moment marks the emergence of discourse from the
featureless, incomprehensible background "noise" of langue which de Man calls the "materiality of the letter," (and to which Locke seems to allude in his reference to the "natural sounds" of words [Essay, IV, xviii, 3]), the event itself, as a reference to reference, is radically unintelligible. Deixis opens a space of difference in language (or, more precisely, in langue), the incoherence of which must be effaced at once if a concept such as language is to stand forth as a determinate phenomenon. The phenomenality of language, in other words, is not something given in advance and therefore intuitable. Its intuitability is, as de Man points out, an effect of the necessary imposition of form upon the blank materiality of the event of utterance which we have identified with deixis and the confusion of the nonphenomenal (or prephenomenal) resistance which utterance poses to itself in that moment onto signifiers, signifieds, and ultimately, as Cynthia Chase points out, onto things, "which thereby acquire their phenomenality, their illusory presence" ("de Man" 195). The chain of substitutions (HI 48) which leads from the phenomenalization of language to that of the world offers the promise that the world, like language, is immediately intuitable and available for cognition rather than merely posited, or constructed through a process of disruption and forgetting. As de Man puts it, the linguistic function serves "as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition" (RT 11), creating the effect that not only language but also the world is available in an unmediated fashion to perception and cognition, which is to say, that the world and its words are legible.
It is on the negative grounds of this phantom promise of the intelligibility of signs and the world that Johnson's own hopes for the *Dictionary* and thus for the recognition of his work as labour rest. As we have seen, Johnson's task as he represents it in the *Plan* is to produce a referent for "dictionary" so perfectly fitted to the word that it will allow no room for the play of those expectations, desires, and vain wishes which have disfigured its signification in the past. To repeat the passage I quoted earlier, Johnson writes "The title which I prefix to my work has long conveyed a very miscellaneous idea, and they that take a dictionary into their hands have been accustomed to expect from it, a solution of almost every difficulty" (5). Johnson, I have said, seeks to dispel such spectral significations, along with the linguistic otherness they portend and the mischief to which they give rise, by discovering the positive, material substance which will serve as the basis for fixing meaning. But, as we have seen, all of the various strategies he employs to determine this substance, whether paraphrastic, etymological, or citational, expose an unrepresentable dimension in language which will not be fixed and whose capacity to resist and disrupt representation and cognition will not be exhausted.

By the same token, however, although radically intangible and utterly unrepresentable, the resistance which Johnson confronts at the limit of his conception of language is the only linguistic "material" with which he has to work. (Indeed, as we have seen, its indeterminateness is cognate with that of *his work*). As such, any effort he makes to fix language on the basis of some positive substance which he "discovers" in it, will necessarily repeat the gesture which is fundamental to the phenomenalization
of language, effacing the inscrutable void of what we might call "sheer" or prephenomenal language, and imposing form -- in the case of the Dictionary, the form of a body -- upon the materiality of that space.

One of the fundamental gestures with which Johnson does so -- one which perhaps explains the attention he draws to the need to "define" adequately the word "dictionary" -- is that of naming, or more precisely, of entitling. As David L. Clark notes, "of all the parts of language it is the name that lends itself to the comforting notion that language is essentially a nomenclature, a system of signs pointing to things that are already given to comprehension in advance of signification" ("Monstrosity," 280). "Prefixed" to the product of Johnson's work, the word "dictionary" points to that which the reader has taken into his or her hands, says in effect, "This is a dictionary," and thus figures the text forth as something immediately and familiarly comprehensible, i.e. as phenomenal. It is also possible, however, that the illusory determinateness of the text, along with the reification of Johnson's work as labour in that text's form as a commodity, are repetitions of a more primordial moment in which form is imposed upon the blankness of the material occurrence which inaugurates language and labour and which the dialectical dimension of naming marks. "This is a Dictionary," says the title of Johnson's text, the proper name gaining its effect of phenomenality and thus becoming legible only by way of the obliteration of the illegible, prephenomenal materiality of the event of naming which the pronoun "this" marks.
That reading might consist not so much of the apprehension of what Jonathan Culler calls "a body of sensible signifiers [given to perception] which stand in a representational relation to conceptual signifieds that are given to the understanding" ("Reading Lyric" 104) as of the figurative imposition of form upon the incoherency of a mute, material occurrence is uncannily suggested by one of the four meanings which Johnson discerns in the verb "To Read." Johnson defines this particular sense of the word to mean, "To discover by characters or marks." The quotation with which he illustrates this explanation, however, suggests that the nature of such an act of "discovery" is by no means certain. The passage, taken from Spenser, reads, "An armed corse did lye, / In whose dead face he read great magnanimity." But to what may Johnson owe his apparent certainty that the magnanimity which is read in the face of the corpse is, in fact, discovered and not imposed? I have said that, in its absolute alterity, the corpse exposes the living human being to the incomprehensible limit of its own finitude. As the residue of the material occurrence of an "imageless act," the corpse marks the boundary of that which the individual may experience meaningfully. As such, it is also that which most resolutely resists the sort of intelligibility which the notion of discovery implies. "To discover" is to come upon something which it is assumed existed prior to its discovery and which has always been available in an unmediated way to cognition, although it has been hidden. And yet, as the tailings of a material occurrence which is beyond cognition, the corpse is precisely that dimension of experience which is undiscoverable. It is only in turning away from and thus effacing the illegible space of
the event which the corpse marks and the concomitant imposition of form upon the materiality of that occurrence, that the sort of recognition necessary for discovery is possible. The discovery of a human quality such as magnanimity in the corpse, in other words, is possible only by way of a gesture in which the cadaver's least magnanimous dimension -- its materiality -- is effaced.

In its radical unintelligibility, the corpse is cognate with what Rodolphe Gasché has called the "texte brut," by which he means "the text before it starts to signify and prior to the established meanings that the community of interpreters has inflicted upon it" ("In-difference to Philosophy" 265). Accordingly, our experience of the corpse is similar to that of the texte brut, which is to say, it is similar to that of reading. As David L. Clark notes,

to read is always already to give a name -- "Readability" -- and a face -- "language" -- to that which is absolutely nameless and faceless, the blank materiality of language. . . . Reading renders familiarly human that which is in-human within language, or more exactly that which lies on the far side of determining what is human about it or not: namely "the uncontrollable power of inscription." ("Monstrosity" 282)

But while nomination may efface the illegible surface of the "texte brut," it cannot do so absolutely. As the example of Johnson's Dictionary suggests, any effort to anatomize language and meaning exhaustively will be relentlessly haunted by the spectre of the nonsignificative, utterly contingent, and possibly inhuman material dimension it must efface in order to do so. Johnson "discovers" a face in the blankness of language, but whether the face is that of a living, phenomenal being or the more ambivalent surface of
a corpse remains uncertain. It is in this uncertainty and the figurative oscillations to which it gives rise that we confront the inscrutable materiality of language. The confrontation is never direct, of course, but is registered at various crucial points in the Plan, "Preface," and Dictionary itself where Johnson's efforts to represent language as an organic and determinate whole default into figures of death, the incomprehensibility of which is cognate with the failure of sense which one experiences at the brink of language.

One would expect Johnson to mount the most rigorous opposition to this catastrophe in his definition of the word which names the product of his labour -- "dictionary." As I have noted, Johnson suggests that the failure of past dictionaries is apparent in the numerous phantom meanings which circulate around that word and the diverse expectations to which those meanings have given rise. To exorcise the spectres and thus efface that dimension of language which is contingent, and with it, the indeterminate aspect of his own work as lexicographer, it would seem important that Johnson allow no room for such play in his definition of "dictionary." And yet it is here, more explicitly perhaps than anywhere else in the text, that we confront the absolute other of the magnanimous face of language. We meet this other in the space which opens between Johnson's "explanation" of "dictionary" and the first of the three quotations with which he illustrates it:

**Dictionary. n.f. [dictionarium, Latin.]** A book containing the words of any language in alphabetical order, with explanations of their meaning; a lexicon; a vocabulary; a word-book.
Some have delivered the polity of spirits, and left an account that they stand in awe of charms, spells, and conjurations; that they are afraid of letters and characters, notes and dashes, which, set together, do signify nothing; and not only in the dictionary of man, but in the subtler vocabulary of Satan. Brown's Vulgar Errours, b. i. c. 10.

Between the common-sense appeal of the explanation and the startling otherworldliness of the quotation which illustrates it, Johnson exposes the nondescript "nowhere" of the texte brut against which the "here" of reading and language take their place. With the quotation from Thomas Brown, Johnson holds up a mirror to the reader which, in a manner similar to that of the corpse, functions as reading's flip side or relative (as opposed to its absolute) other. Thus, from the accounts of those who have "delivered the polity of spirits," we learn that the dead are transfixed by the apparently purely arbitrary arrangement of "letters and characters, notes and dashes, which, set together, do signify nothing." Not merely transfixed, in fact, they experience this nonsignificative dimension of language in a state of "awe" and fear strangely similar to the mood of pathos in which the lexicographer, seeking a positive meaning substance in language, confronts the blank materiality of the event of utterance. The resemblance between the two scenes of reading, Johnson's and the spirits', marks the space of a difference which is common to both: in the figure of the spectres spellbound before apparently random arrangements of letters and diacritical marks we recognize the stuttering oscillations of the lexicographer attempting to monumentalize that which is without substance or form. It is here, in the space of the difference which Johnson's text exposes, that we might begin to think the possibility of what language and reading might look like in the absence of the human.
Whether or not Johnson recognizes his own confrontation with language in the fate of the spectral readers we cannot say. We can venture, however, that if such a recognition did occur, it would be experienced in a tragic mode, as an *anagnoresis* in which the lexicographer awakens suddenly to the realization that his vision of language, along with his plans to represent it exhaustively in his text are based on a profound miscalculation which is in utter contradiction to the impersonal, possibly inhuman resistance he experiences at the limit of language's intelligibility and before which his efforts are destined to fail. It is precisely such a recognition which Johnson describes in the "Preface," when, recalling his early encyclopedic ambitions for the *Dictionary*, he writes, "But these were the dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer" (135). The lexicographer awakens, however, to the nightmare of a language absolutely indifferent to his interrogation: as with many tragic figures, the fate of the one who quests after truth -- in this case, the truth of language -- is so inextricably bound up with the question which motivates that search, that to pursue the question to its end is to risk the destruction of the self which initiated the search, or, in a vein closer to the current context, what de Man has characterized as "the undoing of cognition and its replacement by the uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" (*RT* 37).

Cognition must shield itself from such annihilation and in the two quotations which follow the first it is possible to see the lexicographer formulating a pragmatic response to the imageless confusion he experiences at the brink of language. The two passages read:
Is it such a horrible fault to translate simulacra images? I see what a good thing it is to have a good catholick dictionary. Still.

An army, or a parliament, is a collection of men; a dictionary, or nomenclature, is a collection of words.

Watts.

There is nothing to suggest that, with the three quotations he uses to illustrate the word "dictionary," Johnson thematizes his own experience as a lexicographer. At the same time, however, the trajectory of the quotations conforms in an uncanny way to the mechanism of inscription and effacement which brings discourse into being, vaguely suggesting as it does so an analysis of the relationship of this process to matters of power. For example, in Stillingfleet's endorsement of a dictionary which "translate[s] simulacra images," we might read an acknowledgement by Johnson that, in light of his "discovery" of the lack of a positive, representable substance which would anchor words in the world of the real, the lexicographer who wishes to fix language must simulate the determinateness he cannot establish in fact. We have seen that Johnson simulates the "real" by effacing the non- or prephenomenal dimension of language which cannot be represented, thus obliterating the lack of a "real" against which its representation might be measured. I have also argued that such an effacement occurs in Johnson's text through a dialectical process in which each phenomenon or concept, none of which are pre-given or could exist non-relationally, supplements the lack which inhabits the other. Phenomena thus constitute one another reciprocally, each deriving its apparent identity from that of the other, while placing each in a position where it may with the same
gesture supplement the lack in the other. For example, as we have seen, the simulation of a determinate, organic form of language in the *Dictionary* is coextensive with Johnson's valorization of his own lexicographical work as a determinate activity productive of value, just as the establishment of his work as a determinate, pre-given activity effaces that dimension of language which is beyond the reach of the lexicographer's methods. In all cases, the simulation of determinateness, whether of labour, language, community, or anything else is contingent upon the effacement of a space which, although radically insubstantial, "operates," to quote Derrida, "in all fields, but precisely as different fields. And its operation is different each time, articulated otherwise" (*Positions* 82).

The question then becomes, why is it so important to simulate an identity which cannot be determined in any sort of exhaustive way in fact? I have already argued the necessity Johnson must have felt in the absence of dependable backing from a patron to establish his own efforts as productive of value. The nature of that value, however, is suggested in the final quotation: "An army, or a parliament, is a collection of men; a *dictionary*, or nomenclature, is a collection of words." Continuing to read Johnson's definition of "dictionary" as an allegory of his own confrontation with language, it is clear from the analogy drawn in the final passage between words and armies or parliaments that the importance of a sound, coherent dictionary is ultimately related to power, and to power as it relates to language. What army is this collection of words, whose coherence is an effect of simulation, if not the "mobile army of metaphors,"
metonyms and anthropomorphisms" which Nietzsche in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* calls "truth." As Baudrillard notes in the epigraph to "The Precession of Simulacra," "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth -- it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (1). And this truth, brought into being in the effacement of the disturbing lack experienced by the lexicographer at the limits of language's intelligibility, marks the space in which political decision -- and thus power -- takes place. In putting a tongue in the wound of language, speaking for language with a voice which assures us it is that of language itself, the lexicographer (the grammarian, rhetorician, philosopher, or critic -- whoever might theorize language) represents his or her disruption of the system of social production of which language forms a ubiquitous dimension while representing that disruption as a discovery. In Johnson's *Dictionary*, the true is that which effaces the common space of difference between various orders of discourse, of labour, and the classes with which they are identified. As we shall see in the chapters which follow, it is this truth to which both Joseph Priestley and John Horne Tooke will give the lie.
PART THREE

Chapter Six

The Rhetoric of Consequence:

Joseph Priestley and the Apocalypse of Language

Whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and paradisaical (sic), beyond what our imaginations can now conceive.


It is only from a perfect knowledge of the theory of language in general that we can form any rational expectations of what some ingenious persons in the republick of letters have conjectured may be one of the last and greatest attainments of human genius, viz. a philosophical and universal language, which shall be the most natural and perfect expression of human ideas and sentiments, and much better adapted than any language now in use, to answer all the purposes of human life and science.

-- Priestley, A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar.

1. "Things of Consequence"

In 1762, the British chemist, theologian, and reformer Joseph Priestley published A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar. The lectures, which Priestley had delivered the previous year at the dissenting academy at Warrington where he was tutor in languages,¹ offer an analysis of the "natural principles" (5) on which the "art of language" is "founded" (6). The method is appropriately empirical, at

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least that is until the Nineteenth and final lecture when Priestley speaks of the
"unspeakable advantage of the study of different languages" (295). There he makes the
following, rather cryptic, remark: "To appearance, this [advantage] is an affair of words
only; but these words are, more closely than men imagine, connected with things, and
things of considerable consequence" (295). The comment appears to contradict
Priestley's very Lockeian declaration made just two paragraphs earlier that, among the
many "prejudices and errors" which "the comparison of languages, and frequent
rendering from one into another, helps to make us distinguish," is the tendency he sees
in unilingual speakers to confound "the ideas of words with the ideas of things" (293).²
Suddenly, in the concluding passages of a putatively scientific inquiry, we are confronted
with a most unscientific riddle: if there is no connection between words and things, but
"words are, more closely than men imagine, connected with things, and things of
considerable consequence," what then is the connection between words and things? What
are these "things"? And what are their consequences?

Priestley's two main works on language, his Lectures on the Theory of Language
and Universal Grammar and The Rudiments of English Grammar, published in 1761, and
to a lesser degree his Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism (delivered at
Warrington in 1762 but not published until 1777), corroborate the answer about which
this riddle only hints: the connection between words and "things" is not as simple, nor
as immediate as speakers commonly take it to be.³ Words are connected with things,
true, but with "things" conceived in a particular manner: as "things of considerable
consequence," literally, as things which are significant because of the effects they will produce. The introduction of this consequential and therefore historical element into signification suggests that the nexus between words and things is not transcendental and determinate, but is caught up rather in the differential relations of history of which I have spoken in previous chapters. Furthermore, it is a connection which, Priestley suggests, can only be fully comprehended retrospectively in the aftermath of history, from an Archimedean point where the final consequences and thus the meanings of all historical "words" and "things" will become clear. Like lines of perspective receding toward their vanishing-point, history and language are connected by a distant moment of singularity where they converge and are annihilated. In Priestley's system, this apocalyptic instant of absolute intelligibility, coextensive with the "glorious and paradisaical" future he foresees, marks the culmination of history and language. As such it underwrites the meaningfulness of both.

Priestley's Lectures on the Theory of Language anticipate this moment with rhetoric which, although ostensibly descriptive and scientific, bears traces of a strangely predictive nature, similar to what we might call the rhetoric of consequence itself, prophecy. Nowhere is the prophetic tone more evident than in the final paragraph of the last lecture. To this point in the work, Priestly has constructed a taxonomy of language universals which he says may be used to advance the understanding of, and consequently, the perfection of language. In the final lecture he considers the prospects for the realization of what is the end of such an undertaking, "a universal and philosophical
language" (298) which would supersede the diversity of languages in the world. And it is here his rhetoric is most distinctly prophetic. He writes

Perhaps the analogy of nature may give us some encouragement to expect such an event. For since all other evils and inconveniences have final causes, which terminate by the means of those very evils, the diversity of languages, when it have compleatly answered all the present uses of it, may also contribute to its own extermination. (302)

Although Priestley sounds this note in a lecture concerned mainly with "the origin, use, and cessation" (287) of the diversity of languages, other elements in his work suggest that this last "event" in the history of language involves much more than the displacement of the world's many tongues by one. That much is apparent from his description of the final language he envisages. As we might expect, this language would allow the speakers of different tongues to "make themselves perfectly understood by one another" (300) both in speech and in writing. But this language is not merely universal. It is also what Priestley, following the language projectors of the seventeenth century, calls a "philosophical" language, that is, as he describes it, a language "furnished with an universal character, which shall represent ideas directly without the intervention of any sounds" (299).

The notion of such a radically motivated language was hardly new. In 1605, prompted by missionaries' reports that the characters of Chinese writing referred directly to ideas without the mediation of sounds and words (reports which were mistaken, as it eventually turned out), Francis Bacon proclaimed the possibility of developing a system of "Characters Real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but Things or
Notions" (122). Although the quest which followed both in England and on the Continent was productive more of rumour than success, Hans Aarsleff has noted that for the first half of the seventeenth century, the philosophical language was "the exact equivalent of the philosopher's stone" (LS 261).\(^5\) Not only did it promise to restore the golden age of linguistic uniformity which had existed before the confusion at Babel, a philosophical language was believed to be a means of expressing and embodying all knowledge directly "in a methodical, rationally ordered fashion that mirrored the fabric of nature" (261). In this, a philosophical language would approximate that which Adam spoke in the Garden of Eden: divinely imparted, the Adamic tongue reflected the perfect knowledge of its speakers, allowing him to express the essence of things in the names he gave them. And indeed, as Aarsleff has argued (LS 260), the Adamic tongue was the model for the philosophical languages of the seventeenth century, including the one John Wilkins\(^6\) proposed in his *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668) which Priestley praises in his lectures as "the most rational plan of an universal and philosophical language" (298).\(^7\)

By 1762, however, when Priestley published his *Lectures*, the dream of a philosophical language was something of an anachronism.\(^8\) Wilkins' *Essay* was almost one hundred years old and, like other seventeenth-century universal language projects, was generally regarded, if remembered at all, as "too complicated, too incomplete and too rigid" to be practical (Large 41).\(^9\) Furthermore, as M.M. Slaughter has noted, Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) had undermined the
authority of the Aristotelian method which lay behind such taxonomic schemes as Wilkins'. Slaughter writes: "classification could no longer be seen as a means of explaining and representing the nature of nature. Taxonomy was supplanted by mathematics as the method and the language of science" (194).

The enthusiasm with which Priestley considers the possibility of a universal and philosophical language is, no doubt, moderated to some extent by the disrepute into which such schemes had generally fallen. He writes, for example, of those "men of learning who flattered themselves with the prospect" (297) of such a language, noting that to perfect language's imperfections, one must have a perfect knowledge not just of language but also of all the things to which language refers. For the moment, he writes, neither is sufficiently understood for such a scheme to succeed. Admitting this, however, he refuses to relinquish the possibility that such a "noble project" (301) will not someday be realized. In fact, as the lecture draws to a close, he seems quite optimistic about the future of these supposedly superannuated schemes, declaring with a confidence that is almost prophetic

that such a design may be effected, in some distant ages of the world, when the powers of language and of nature shall be more perfectly understood, doth not seem so improbable as many of the present actual discoveries in *philosophy* must have seemed to all men, but a century ago. (302)
2. Providential History and the Algebra of Truth

To understand Priestley's interest in a discredited project more appropriate to the previous century than to his own, and to make sense of what is in essence an eschatological theory of meaning, it is helpful to consider Priestley's ideas concerning language in the context of some of his other interests, of which there were many. When Priestley is remembered today, it is usually as a scientist. In his own day, however, he was known -- and in some cases was notorious -- for much else. As one biographer observes, "he aspired to be preacher and teacher, linguist and historian, grammarian and flute-player, chemist and theologian" (Hirst xii) and left his mark in a surprising number of these areas, with the exception perhaps of flute-playing, for which, we are told, he nonetheless "congratulated himself on having no ear, being thus 'more easily pleased'" (DNB 359). Priestley is best known as the discoverer of oxygen. He is also regarded as a founder of the Unitarian Church, and as one of the intellectual sources of Bentham's utilitarianism. Underlying these activities, however, and in a sense unifying their apparent diversity, was a profound millenialist sensibility: for Priestley, history was moving ineluctably by means of its human agents toward the apocalyptic moment when the scriptural prophecies of an earthly paradise would be fulfilled. His complex faith in providence, and his conception of its relation to human action, inspired and framed all of his endeavours: whether Priestley is writing about religion, government, history, education, electricity, or language, he does so always with one eye reckoning the distance -- historical and conceptual -- to the millennium.
But Priestley -- or "Gunpowder" Priestley as he was known after an offhand remark of his about placing explosives "under the old building of error and superstition" was made public (Drabble 788) -- was also a political radical, and his millennialism is of a "distinctly republican" (Fruchtman 31) cast. For example, although in his Essay on the First Principles of Government, first published in 1768, he may prophesy that the end of history "will be glorious and paradisaical (sic), beyond what our imaginations can now conceive" (8), the timing of this inevitability remains for him a matter of historical politics. "The great instrument in the hand of divine providence, of this progress of the species towards perfection," he writes, "is society and consequently government" (5-6). For this reason, he continues, "that form of government will have a just claim to our approbation which favours this progress, and that must be condemned in which it is retarded" (8).

In Priestley's view, the form of government "most conducive to the happiness of mankind at present, and most favourable to the increase of his happiness in futurity" (8-9) was republicanism. Only a republic promised to safeguard and advance the single most important prerequisite of progress, and thus of the millennium: liberty. Liberty was crucial for it was only through the free expression and exchange of ideas that human consciousness could develop to the point where people could comprehend God's will. As Jack Fruchtman explains in his book The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley:
Only in a pure, uncorrupt form of government, namely the republic, could citizens be free to unlock the mysteries of the universal and divine historical plan. Republican government was the sole political arrangement whereby civic man realized his own virtuousness and possessed liberty and godliness to develop his consciousness sufficiently to be prepared for the end of time. (49-50)

And "consciousness" was a key element here, for in Priestley's view the growth of human understanding was coextensive with the progress of human government and history. As he writes in An Essay on the First Principles of Government, "we can never expect to see human nature . . . brought to perfection, but in consequence of indulging unbounded liberty, and even caprice in conducting it" (44). Only by increasing their knowledge could people come to recognize their role in the divine plan of history and act accordingly. Conversely, such a recognition would lead to and reinforce a commitment to republicanism as the form of government which best allowed people the freedom which was essential if they were to engage in the sort of open enquiry and debate necessary, in Fruchtman's words, "to develop their spiritual and intellectual capacities to the point, known only to God, when they would be prepared for the millennium" (31). As Fruchtman notes

while a free society opened the way for man's developing consciousness, the development of his intellectual and spiritual capabilities allowed him to understand how to organize government so he could achieve the common good, which obviously included the security and happiness of all citizens. But it also contained man's ultimate interest, namely the attainment of the future millennium. The coming millennial moment was contingent on this dual interconnected progress in politics and the mind. (85)
With the millennium, all temporal distinctions would be subsumed into an absolute present and human understanding would attain a near-divine perspective.¹⁰ We have an intimation of the sort of expansive comprehension such a view affords in the example of those "men, of great and superior minds," whom Priestley claims enjoy a state of permanent and equable felicity, in a great measure independent of the uncertain accidents of life. In such minds the ideas of things, that are seen to be the cause and effect of one another, perfectly coalesce into one, and present but one common image. Thus all the ideas of evil absolutely vanish, in the idea of the greater good with which it is connected, or of which it is productive. *(Government 2-3)*

But such instances only hint at the consummate knowledge towards which human consciousness is advancing. To grasp the scope of the millennial panorama which awaits humanity, we must imagine a more celestial vantage point:

To this comprehension of mind, which is extending with the experience of every day, no bounds can be set. Nay, it should seem, that while our faculties of perception and action remain in the same vigour, our progress towards perfection must be continually accelerated; and that nothing but a future existence, in advantageous circumstances, is requisite to advance a mere man above every thing we can now conceive of excellence and perfection. This train of thought may, in some measure, enable us to conceive wherein consists the superiority of angelic beings, whose sphere of comprehension, that is, whose present time, may be of proportionably greater extent of their recollection and foresight; and even give us some faint idea of the incomprehensible excellence and happiness of the Divine Being, in whose view nothing is past or future, but to whom the whole compass of duration is, to every real purpose, without distinction present. *(Government 3-4)*

Priestley derives the notion of this imminent harmony between human consciousness and divine will from David Hartley’s *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations*. In the *Observations*, originally published in 1749, but
reissued in 1775 under the title *Hartley's Theory of the Mind* in an edition abridged by Priestley, Hartley sought to provide an empirical basis for Christian hope by offering a mechanistic theory of the manner in which the mind has the capacity to derive spiritual knowledge from sensual experience (Halévy 7-8). Priestley was clearly convinced by the materialistic elements in Hartley's argument, proclaiming he had "thrown more useful light upon the theory of the mind than Newton did upon the theory of the natural world" (*Examination* 2). Central to Hartley's hypothesis was the Doctrine of the Association of Ideas which describes the mind's purely physical tendency to link ideas which it has experienced together in such a way that should one of those ideas be experienced later by itself, it will automatically evoke "such others as it has the nearest connexion with, and relation to" (Priestley 1775: 185, qtd. in Fruchtman 38). With his notions derived from the psychological speculations of Locke and Hume, Hartley added a physiological dimension to this principle and extended it into the sphere of morality. He argues that the pains and pleasures we associate with particular actions and objects are "transferred by Association more and more every Day, upon things that afford neither sensible Pleasure nor sensible Pain in themselves, and so beget the intellectual Pleasures and Pains" (Hartley 1: 82). Compounded by the mechanical process of association into increasingly complex configurations, these intellectual pleasures and pains pass through various stages of development, culminating in that final phase which is "the Sum total of all the rest, and the ultimate Result from them" (1:497), the pure spiritual pleasure of the "Moral Sense." Characterized by "perfect Self-annihilation" (2:282), Hartley writes, the
moral sense "carries us perpetually to the pure Love of God, as our highest and ultimate Perfection, our End, Centre, and only Resting-place, to which yet we can never attain" (1:497).

For Priestley, association offered a comprehensive doctrine which allowed humankind a means of uncovering the ultimate truths of reality. Even those "ideas of universality and immutability (moral truth, God's relationship to man, God's plan) were all knowable through association" (86-7), writes Fruchtman. In his introduction to Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, Priestley claimed that association tends in a very eminent degree to enlarge the comprehension of the mind, to give a man a kind of superiority to the world and to himself, so as to advance him in the scale of being, and consequently lay a foundation for equable and permanent happiness. (qtd. in Fruchtman II, f. Works 3:184-5).

In short, by distilling spiritual knowledge from the pleasure and pain of our everyday experience, association guaranteed the expansion of human knowledge and with it the reduction of all "particular facts, and particular laws" until, with the end of history, "one great comprehensive law shall be found to govern both the material and intellectual world" (Hartley's Theory xxv).

Here we find a possible explanation for Priestley's interest in a philosophical language: Hartley's associationism offered Priestley a physiological and psychological hook on which to hang the millennialist notions which no doubt also attracted him to the supernannuated notion of a philosophical language. As this passage suggests, association promises precisely the sort of absolute and unified knowledge necessary for the realization
of a universal, philosophical language such as Priestley foresees in his *Lectures*. We have said that such languages were generally modeled after the Adamic tongue and the perfect understanding of things it was believed to have embodied. A similar recuperative element is to be found in the principle of association for, as Hartley wrote, "Association . . . has a Tendency to reduce the State of those who have eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, back again to a paradisiacal one" (1:83).

Despite this apparent agreement between the Adamic and associational doctrines, however, Priestley takes some pains to excise certain specifically Adamic elements from his own theory of language. There are two main points to the Adamic Doctrine. First, as David Katz notes, it is apparent in Genesis that "God created the world by speaking the original language" (132), a language which he imparted to Adam. As we have noted, this language was in accordance with Adam's perfect knowledge, and allowed him, in the words of the English churchman Robert South, to write "the Nature of things upon their names" (qtd. in Katz 133). Secondly, the Doctrine contended that Adam's perfect language had not been entirely lost with the Fall or even at Babel, but persisted either more-or-less intact in a tongue still spoken somewhere on earth (such as Hebrew), or in traces in all contemporary languages (Aarsleff, *LS* 282). This residue offered speakers the assurance that their words had once been firmly grounded in those things they signified and that, at some microscopic etymological level, a correspondence between words and things survived. Aarsleff explains
Still retaining the divine nature of their common origin, languages were in fundamental accord with nature, indeed they were themselves part of creation and nature. They were divine and natural, not human and conventional. . . . The authority of scriptural revelation ensured that languages held a nomenclature, that words did name species and essences. (LS 25-6)

Regardless of how diverse and corrupt languages may have become since the catastrophe at Babel, Aarsleff writes, "men" were still "little Adams and spoke much greater truth than they knew" (26).

In his Lectures on the Theory of Language, however, Priestley offers a different assessment of the first language. Far from being the harmonious naming of things according to their essences, he argues, in a manner which recalls Rousseau's account of the origin of language in involuntary utterances, that "the first attempts towards speech must have been automatic sounds, excited by particular circumstances, and little more than inarticulate expressions of fear, grief, joy, surprize, &c" (237). The "primitive language" (288) that Priestley described was an "imperfect" (238), laborious affair, and the possibility that it might have been otherwise -- that God may in fact have created the consummate tongue with Adam -- merits only a footnote in the Lectures:

Notwithstanding the powers of speech might have been communicated in a considerable degree, to the first parents of the human race; yet, since it is natural to suppose it would be only sufficient for the purposes of their own condition, we may perhaps conceive more justly of the manner in which language was improved, by supposing mankind to have begun from so small a beginning as is represented in the lecture. (237-8)

Priestley accounts for the diversity of languages with a similar disregard for the Adamic claim that the first language had not been entirely lost at Babel but persisted in
traces in all contemporary languages (Aarsleff, *LS* 282). Even his one concession to the Babel myth is qualified by naturalistic considerations: "The race of mankind having, according to the Old Testament history, had one origin, must have spoken one language, and this would continue to be spoken without much variation while their numbers would permit them to reside near together" (287-8). After this one allowance Priestley is in open disagreement with the Biblical account and thus with one of the key scriptural sources of the Adamic doctrine. He argues

The present diversity of languages is generally believed to have taken its rise from the building of *Babel*, and to have been brought about by the interposition of the divine being: But it is no impiety to suppose, that this (agreeable to most other operations of the deity) might have been brought about by natural means. (288)

In distinguishing his theory of language from the Adamic doctrine in this manner, Priestley foregoes the singular reassurance afforded to Adamicists, and even to one such as Tooke who looks to etymology for truth, that what was might well be again. In turning from the "historical origin," imagining what will be without the consolation of what was, Priestley seeks to ground meaning in a future which he can only evoke in prophecy. Before turning to this aspect of his text, however, we should also note that Priestley's ideas concerning the Adamic language seem also to be in accordance with those of John Locke. As outlined in Chapter Two, Book III of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, opens with an observation that, contrary to the Adamic doctrine, God did not bestow a perfect language upon Adam, but rather provided the first members of the human race with only the capability of speech. Locke writes
God having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society. *Man* therefore had by Nature his Organs so fashioned, as to be *fit to frame articulate Sounds*, which we call Words. But this was not enough to produce Language; for Parrots, and several other Birds, will be taught to make articulate Sounds distinct enough, which yet, by no means, are capable of Language. (III, I, 1)

As Aarsleff has argued, Locke’s *Essay*, and Book III in particular, is aimed at uprooting the Adamic doctrine and its formalization of the "word-thing" habit whereby speakers "*often suppose their Words to stand also for the reality of Things*" (III, ii, 5) as if there was an essential cognitive identity between the two (*LS* 24). For Locke the connection between a word and the idea for which it stands is arbitrary, and therefore forged voluntarily and privately by the speaker. Words, he writes, "come to be made use of by Men, as the signs of their Ideas; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate Sounds and certain Ideas, . . . but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an Idea" (III, ii, 1). Language is social and conventional, Locke argues, not divinely determined or motivated. It is the product of "ignorant and illiterate people, who sorted and denominated things by those sensible qualities they found in them" (III, vi, 25). Priestley similarly regards language as an "invention of men, and particularly of rude, uncultivated men" (*Language* 115). "Imperfect" (186) from the start, it is governed not by the uniform laws of nature but by "the influence of fashion and caprice" (*Rudiments* 58).
Despite the resemblances, however, there are important differences between Locke's and Priestley's conceptions of language. Most telling is the contrast in their interpretations of the fact of the diversity of languages, a difference particularly instructive when considered in the context of the Adamic doctrine and the many projects for a universal and philosophical language which it inspired in the seventeenth century. For the writers of such artificial languages, the diversity of tongues was a curse which had befallen humanity at Babel, and against which they invariably offered their projects as remedies. Even Wilkins, who had no patience for the esoteric tendencies of many of those who espoused the Adamic doctrine (Aarsleff, *LS* 248), presented the advantages of a universal language in recuperative terms, extolling "the perfection of such an invention as the only way to unite the seventy-two languages of the first confusion" (*Mercury* 110, qtd. in Knowlson 10). Although the world's variety of tongues was a chastening reminder of humanity's remoteness from the paradisiacal state of Adam, the possibility that such an originary language might once have existed offered the hope of a fully-motivated sign and indeed this became the ideal on which the philosophical languages were modelled. Locke's view was decisively the opposite. For him, the diversity of tongues was proof only of the basic arbitrary nature of the sign: as he argues, if there was a "natural connexion . . . between particular articulate Sounds and certain *Ideas*, . . . there would be but one Language amongst all Men" (III, ii, 1). Priestley agrees with Locke on many points, but they part ways here: for Priestley, the multiplicity of languages is not proof of any absolute arbitrariness of the sign. But, importantly, it is
not a curse either. It is, in fact, a blessing, although a blessing disguised to temporal understanding as a curse. Priestley regards the diversity of languages as he does all differences — as a "temporary" and "salutary" evil (Language 297) which is necessary if providence and its human agents are to sort the true from the false and create the conditions necessary for the fulfilment of the Biblical prophecies of the millennium. Priestley writes, for example, that

diversity of languages and diversity of government (the one in a great measure contributing to the other) tended to check the propagation of vice and false religion in the early ages of the world. This would help to prevent the establishment of any one species of idolatry in the world, which might have taken place in consequence of one common language, and one empire, or much larger empires, and of longer duration than any have actually subsisted. Whereas, divided as the state of the world hath been, no superior degree of credit was given to any species of false religion more than to another; by which means, their mutual absurdities have been more easily exposed, and true religion hath had a fairer opportunity of establishing itself. (292)

Regardless of how inconvenient or evil it may appear at the time, difference always serves as a check against any error which, if unopposed, might monopolize the understanding of an individual, a race, or of humanity as whole. Difference allows comparisons to take place in which error may cancel error in a sort of providential algebra which leaves truth as its remainder. Every truth and, so to speak, every displacement (or "diversion") of the truth, is a brick in the road to the millennium. We will return to the question of diversity and truth in Priestley’s texts later in this chapter.

For now, however, we may say that Priestley’s ideas on language negotiate between the freedom embodied in the radical arbitrariness of the sign as described by
Locke and the epistemological and semiotic refuge offered by the residually-motivated word of the Adamic doctrine. By abandoning the dream of an originary unity of the sign which motivates language in Adamic schemes, and displacing that ground of meaning from the beginning of history to its end, Priestley is able to accommodate the "voluntary" quality of the Lockean sign to his own millennial framework. The voluntariness of signification, in turn, dispels the Adamic doctrine's sense of meaning as a trace fossilized in the sediment of contemporary language, and of that language as a corruption of the first tongue, and of history as a barrier between the present and the wisdom of that fully-motivated speech of the past. As the millennial end displaces the Adamic cause as the vanishing point which motivates language, contemporary speech is transformed from the corrupt remnant of a pristine origin to the promising source of a final perfection: language becomes a passage towards meaning instead of its echo, and meaning is identified with consequence, not cause. Priestley thus emphasizes precisely that active dimension of language whose disruptive effects we have said that Johnson seeks to limit.

With its promise of imminent meaningfulness, Priestley's teleological theory appears to motivate language while at the same time -- because that meaningfulness is deferred -- preserving within language, a pocket of undecidability. As such, the true connection between words and things is never so immediately intelligible that we could say that words possess a determinate, present meaning: a word's meaning is determined by the place it takes in the chain of temporal relations, the final consequence of which is the millennium, the only position from which a word's true significance is evident.
Priestley characterizes words as he does governments, as means rather than immediately meaningful, their meaning resting ultimately in their role as means to the end. But as that role cannot be known in advance, the position by which it is marked in the historical chain of speech events is a space of undecidability. As such, words remain highly elusive objects of knowledge. Nowhere "present" with meaning intact and thus immediately intelligible -- nowhere able to speak for themselves -- and connected only by way of their illocutionary and perlocutionary effects to the final consequence which will render them truly meaningful, words in Priestley's Lectures, take on the status of events, mute facts, the absolute intelligibility of which is deferred to the distant future and the millennial moment in which the cognitive difference between words and things will -- it is hoped -- vanish.  

And yet, precisely because it consists of events and "instruments" with the "natural power" to create effects, Priestley maintains that language is available to interrogation in much the same way as the facts which are the subject of scientific knowledge. As such, in his Lectures, Priestley applies the empirical methods of science to the study of language. "The art of language," he maintains, is founded upon science; and it is a matter both of curiosity and usefulness to enquire into the natural powers of those sounds and characters which are the instruments of it, to consider the modifications they are capable of, and their fitness to answer the purposes of a language proper for the mutual communication of such beings as we are. (6)
This method is the only way, he claims, to develop an understanding of language which will advance the overall progress of knowledge and thus expedite the coming of the millennium. As he writes,

> It is only from a perfect knowledge of the theory of language in general that we can form any rational expectations of what some ingenious persons in the republick of letters have conjectured may be one of the last and greatest achievements of human genius, viz. a philosophical and universal language, which shall be the most natural and perfect expression of human ideas and sentiments, and much better adapted than any language now in use, to answer all the purposes of human life and science. (7-8)

The empirical mode of Priestly's Lectures, like the implicitly eschatological argument it presents, is consistent, moreover, with the more general opposition between science and art which informs his writings on language. Science, the privileged term of the pair, is identified with the uniformity of nature, and as such is represented as transcending the temporal limits which confine the cognitive grasp of the arts, among which Priestley locates language. He remarks

> Language partakes much of the nature of art, and but little of the nature of science; both because improvements in language have their *ne plus ultra*¹⁴ and because it is a thing not exempt from the influence of fashion and caprice: whereas true science is the same in all places, and in all times, and admits of unbounded improvements. (*Rudiments* 58)

Thus, while science is associated with a comprehensive and timeless millennial vision of reality which "enlarge[s] the soul, extend[s] the faculties, and give[s] scope to the most generous affections" (*Rudiments* 62), language is identified with a cognitive mode which, limited by the fragmentary nature of temporal understanding, "contracts the faculties, and cherishes the meaner and baser passions of our minds" (62). Language is a matter of
convention. Regulated only by the vicissitudes of "all-governing custom" (Rudiments vii), it is marked by a contingency and inconstancy antithetical to the "simple and uniform laws" (Language 115) which Priestley identifies with science and nature.

But although subordinated to calculation in Priestley's theory of language, contingency nevertheless retains a monstrous capacity to disrupt the totalizations of scientific knowledge, including the quasi-scientific descriptions presented in the Lectures. It could be said, in fact, that by invoking "science" as a figure of truth, Priestley is able to contain, or at least appear to contain (ironically enough, with a figure of expansion), the dislocating effects of the radically random character his theory ascribes to language, thus preserving the possibility of a motivated connection between words, ideas, and things which that theory has, for the present, eliminated. For, in deferring the possibility of such a determinate cognitive link to the end of history, Priestley's theory foregrounds an aspect of language which is productive rather than representational or, in the terminology of the English philosopher J.L. Austin, performative rather than constative.

Austin identifies the performative as a non-representational dimension of language which philosophers have habitually overlooked because of their assumption that "the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact,' which it must do either truly or falsely" (Austin 1). Unlike such "constative" statements, however, performative language, when uttered under the appropriate conditions, achieves something: the utterance itself performs an action. Shoshana Felman offers several useful examples: "[W]hen I say 'I promise,' 'I swear,' 'I
apologize,' I am not describing my act but accomplishing it; by speaking, by pronouncing
these words, I produce the event that they designate; the very act of promising, swearing,
apologizing, and so forth" (16). Performative language does something, and it is
precisely this active, productive function which is shadowed forth in the emphasis
Priestley places on language as a "means": in his theory, each utterance is an act, and
a political act at that, which either hastens or delays the arrival of the millennial moment
of consummate meaning.

In Austin, performance is a subset of one particular type of speech act which he
calls "illocutionary." The illocutionary "force" of a "locution" (or utterance) is
determined by the social context in which it occurs. For example, the phrase "I'm going
to get you," may have the illocutionary force of a promise, a threat, or an assertion,
depending upon the social context in which it is uttered. Poststructuralist thought,
however, which takes as one of its tasks the articulation of the relationship between what
we have referred to as the "saying" and the "said" of language, exploits Austin's notion
of performativity scandalously so as to signal not the illocutionary force of an utterance,
but rather an arch-performativity which obtains in the event of utterance itself.15
(Indeed, we might say that three things are important in the poststructuralist take on
performativity: locution! locution! locution!) Where Austin considers locution strictly
in terms of its formal properties, it is for Derrida and de Man an act, although an act
which must be understood to possess a certain non-subjective and indeed, perhaps, an
inhuman aspect which necessarily exceeds cognition. It is this sense of the term which
I will invoke in my discussion of Priestley. As an aspect of language which is irreducible to representation, performance as it has been inflected by de Man and Derrida, adumbrates the same infrastructures of difference and displacement as those variously and with different emphases named by such terms as "materiality," "inscription," the "trace," and so on. As such, the very "performative" dimension of language upon which Priestley props his desire for motivated meaning is also that which forbids the sort of "laws which have no exceptions" (A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar 115) which would be the corollary of such a perfect language. "Any speech act produces an excess of cognition, but it can never know the process of its own production" (AR 300) writes de Man: the dimension of language marked by the event of utterance or "performance" constitutes an unsurpassable horizon of cognition which will necessarily exceed our efforts to know it, and which as such will prohibit the sort of final moment of perfectly-realized knowledge which Priestley foretells. As Derrida demonstrates in his long debate with John R. Searle over Austin, the irreducibly performative nature of language makes the exhaustion of its citational context impossible - - there will always be something left to say, and this excess forbids the sort of closure that Priestley imagines to be imminent. That there will always be something left to say, moreover, is a consequence not of the size of the field (as Priestley seems to think) but rather of the differential nature of the field. As long as language performs -- as long as it is at root an act -- the ends and means of knowledge will never coincide. It is precisely this non-coincidence of the non-semantic and semantic aspects of language which
Saussure confronts in his inability to determine whether the "words" we read in anagrammatic play are the effects of accident or codification. And just as Saussure drew back — as if at "a terror glimpsed" (*HI* 37) — from the disturbingly inconclusive results of his research into anagrams, Priestley palliates the unsettling implications of the performative dimension of language whose contours he traces by a retreat into scientism.

3. History and Hegemony

As de Man notes, Saussure's response to the disruptive implications his anagrammatic research held for the possibility that language might be conceived strictly in terms of interpretability, and that experience may be assumed to consist in the apprehension of phenomena which present themselves as such to understanding, was one of caution. No less circumspect, however, are the rhetorical measures Priestley undertakes to preserve Man, God, and Reason from the random violence implicit in the performative model of language which his *Lectures* describe. The torsion such delimiting gestures entail is apparent in the peculiar ambivalence which characterizes that description. On the one hand, the text valorizes performativity as the element in language which, although contingent and meaningless in itself, is essential to the progress of human history. On the other hand, the *Lectures* treats that productive capacity of language with some wariness, particularly the possibility that it may, under the right
conditions, efface its own arbitrariness, creating homogeneous effects of meaning which, however provisionally, usurp the status of truth which Priestley reserves for science.

This disturbing capacity of language to impose effects of truth autonomously is suggested in the same passage from Priestley's final lecture on language in which he discusses the benefits arising from the variety of tongues in the world. After considering the advantages linguistic diversity offers humanity as a whole, Priestley concentrates on its value for the individual:

The study of different languages hath a most happy influence upon the human mind, in freeing it from many prejudices and errors, which arise from verbal associations and analogies. We see that persons who have no knowledge of more than one language are perpetually confounding the ideas of words with the ideas of things; which the comparison of languages, and frequent rendering from one into another, helps to make us distinguish. (293)

Any trace of anxiety apparent in this quotation does not arise exclusively from an undue concern with the arbitrary connection between words and things. Indeed, it is the absence of such a determinate link which Priestley offers as the assurance that language will transcend the vagaries of "mere custom" (226) and progress towards its perfection: arbitrariness and the performativity it implies are crucial to providence's algebraic calculation of truth.

But so too is difference. Although diversity may appear as an "evil" now, its effects are far more salutary when regarded in the context of providential history, especially if these effects are compared to those which arise from the repression of difference, either by accident or design. Diversity is a natural principle which manifests
itself, Priestley writes, "in every . . . production" (56). In the Rudiments, for example, he observes:

It is not nature that requires a perfect similarity of style in all that write upon the same subject. The dresses of many persons of the same age, the same nation, the same climate, and even upon the same occasion, may have equal propriety, and yet be considerably different. In some things a person may innocently consult his own person and taste. (57)

Priestley juxtaposes this "natural" diversity with the artificial uniformity imposed by the "general laws" (57) of any single human authority which seeks to regulate or eradicate diversity. Critics, for example, have been particularly ignorant of the importance of diversity in literary matters, attempting to regulate style with prescriptions which serve only to inhibit the "native freedom" (58) of writers to express their individual geniuses. Priestley comments:

This natural foundation for diversity of style, critics seem not to have sufficiently attended to, and have, hence been too hasty in establishing general laws of writing from particular instances of successful composition; and have denied and circumscribed the paths to literary excellence, in such a manner, that no writer, who pays a scrupulous regard to their rules, can ever arrive at it. (57)

The republican tenor of Priestley's complaints is no mere rhetorical extravagance. In his Lectures, as we have seen, he argues that the development of any language to its "perfection" is related to a people's ability to expand the scope of their knowledge, a function coextensive with the political progress of a nation. Priestley writes: "The regular growth of languages proceeds from the necessity of giving names to new objects, new ideas, and new combinations of ideas" (169). Such demands, he argues, are best
satisfied by the arts. The artistic life of any culture, however, is related to various political factors which Priestley evaluates in terms of their ability to foster diversity and facilitate contact among differends. Exemplary conditions were embodied, for example, in the democracies of Ancient Greece where "a great number of separate communities, perpetually vying with each other in power, policy, commerce, and arts" (170) were brought together by

such institutions as games, festivals, &c. which drew a vast concourse of people together, and where men distinguished themselves by their talents in publick speaking; where not only publick consultations were held for the general utility of Greece, but poems, and even histories, were recited in publick. (170-1)

Under such conditions, Priestley writes, people "could not fail giving particular attention to their language" (171). Most significant of these communities, of course, was Athens, "whose constitution was a more perfect democracy, and in other respects afforded more scope for the use of language, and where the rewards of literary excellence were more certain, and more inviting" (171).

Language thrives, it seems, when nourished by republican freedom and the diversity it encourages. But, when isolated from difference and confined by the monolithic oppression of an autocratic form of government, it languishes. Priestley's example of the latter is the Hebrews:

The private life and policy of the Hebrews, living under an absolute monarchy, and whose religion forbid them the use of the arts of painting and statuary; and the immediate design of which was to keep them clear of all connection with neighbouring nations, was too uniform to afford
them many opportunities or occasions of enlarging, or embellishing their language. (169-70)

Insulated from difference, forbidden the improvements afforded by those arts which "exercise the inventive faculties of men" and "augment and diversity their stock of ideas" (172), and without "any inducement to excel in the use of speech" (172), the Hebrews remained, Priestley says, "strangers to the arts and sciences; they lived generally under an absolute monarchy, and, in their whole history there occurs not one period in which eloquence, or the art of speaking in public, is taken notice of" (269).

Wielding a power no less threatening to the natural evolutionary processes of language than that of an absolute monarch, however, is the grammarian. According to Priestley, the vagaries of custom are immanently preferable to the edicts of "a publick Academy, invested with authority to ascertain the use of words" (Rudiments vii). Such a body, he writes, is "not only unsuitable to the genius of a free nation, but in itself ill calculated to reform and fix a language" (vii). Instead, Priestley maintains, it is best to adopt a laissez faire policy towards any particular language, trusting its development to the forces of the discursive marketplace. All that is required for such growth is a diversity of "forms of speech," writes Priestley, insisting that "different forms must necessarily be adopted by different persons" (179). With this condition met, the invisible hand which guides the development of languages will do its work. Priestley maintains that

We need make no doubt but that the best forms of speech will, in time, establish themselves by their own superior excellence: and, in all
controversies, it is better to wait the decisions of Time, which are slow and sure, than to take those of Synods, which are often hasty and injudicious. A manufacture for which there is a great demand, and a language that many persons have leisure to read and write, are both sure to be brought in time to all the perfection of which they are capable. As to the little varieties which the interposition of an academy might prevent, they appear to me very far from having a disagreeable effect in the style of different persons writing upon different subjects. What would Academies have contributed to the perfection of the Greek and Latin languages? Or who, in those free states, would have submitted to them? (Rudiments vii-viii)

This is not to say that grammarians and critics have no role to play in bringing a language to maturity. Indeed, like Condillac,17 Priestley maintains, "the progress of a language towards perfection may be considerably accelerated by the labours of persons who give their attention to it" (Language 180).18 The fruits of these labours, however, must "recommend themselves by their own weight" (180), not on the strength of any critic's or grammarian's authority. For when such opinions have the sanction of any authority, and forms of speech are adopted because recommended by them, and not on account of the reasons that might be alleged in their favour, since all men, and all bodies of men, are fallible, the interposition of their authority is in danger of contributing to establishing phrases and constructions, which the more mature judgement of after ages would see reason to correct: and though the spirit of men will assert their liberty, in rejecting what they do not approve, such undue influence may keep a language much longer in an imperfect state than it otherwise would have been. (181)

To avoid this unnecessary delay, Priestley urges a shift from a normative, prescriptive linguistics to a study of language more empirical and descriptive in its analyses -- precisely what he offers us in the Lectures. Thus, he continues:
All the real service that any men, or bodies of men, can do to a language, is to analyze it into its parts, to show distinctly what are the materials and composition of it, and thereby make the whole structure of it perfectly understood. For when, by the judicious disposition of every thing belonging to a language, all its analogies are seen at one view, it will presently appear what is redundant, deficient, or ambiguous in the words or construction of it.

Before an improvement can be made of any things its present powers must be perfectly known. Before we can improve upon Nature, by an artificial combination of its powers, the laws of nature must be understood; and they are only to be understood by a careful observation of what doth in fact take place in consequence of them. A digest of these observations makes a system of natural philosophy. (181-2)

If grammarians and critics are to help rather than hinder the progress of a particular language, and conceivably the advancement towards a universal, philosophical language, they must, in other words, conduct their work more like scientists.

In Priestley's theory progress depends on the presence of a range of variations within any category of knowledge at a given time. This heterogeneity allows room for the comparisons which are necessary to prohibit any "one species" (292) from establishing hegemony over the category to which it belongs, thereby impeding the providential march towards the one true unity to be realized with the millennium. In linguistic matters, Priestley writes, "The Study of different languages hath a most happy influence upon the human mind" (293) by protecting it from the "prejudices and errors" which may arise from significations generated randomly by "verbal associations and analogies," that is, by accidental convergences occurring at the level of what Priestley calls the "merely verbal" (295). In the absence of a second language whose differences from the first allows the arbitrariness of the signifying processes of both to stand forth
in a way which they cannot when considered in isolation, the effects generated contingently by "verbal associations and analogies" may be mistaken for determinate, motivated meanings. In such a situation, however, the "meaning" of any element is, in fact, a product of its "circumstances and adjuncts" (294), that is, of its relation to other elements in the system and not of the actual "nature of the idea" which that element presents to the mind (294). Without the possibility of comparison, these relational patterns are construed as cognitive, representational meanings. Priestley adopts a grammatical example to prove the point:

We see, in particular, with what difficulty and uncertainty persons who have learned only their native tongue distinguish the parts of speech, for want of attending to the different kinds of ideas which they represent. Let the experiment be tried upon a person of good understanding, and it will [be] found a considerable time, and in consequence of very close thinking, that he can learn to distinguish the most obviously distinct parts, as substantives, adjectives, and verbs: and perhaps he will distinguish them, at last, rather by their circumstances and adjuncts, than by an attention to the nature of the ideas they present to his mind. For instance, he will distinguish an adjective, by its admitting man or thing after it; a substantive by its taking good or bad before it, and a verb by its being preceded by the personal pronouns, I, thou, he, &c. and not by considering that a substantive is a name of a thing; an adjective, a property; and a verb, an affirmation. And, as in this, so, for the same reason, it is easy to see that, in every other respect, the comparison of different languages must be of infinite service in helping us to disentangle and distinguish our ideas. (293-4)

Difference invites the comparisons which provide the expanded view of reality and truth which Priestley identifies with science. Comparison among languages, for example, throws the potentially aleatory character of signification into relief, allowing the aberrant cognitive effects of any accidents of meaning to be minimized. Problems arise, however,
when the mind has no such recourse to a second language whose differences from the first would permit any unmotivated, accidental effects of meaning to be detected and challenged. When this is the case, one language gains hegemony over signification, with disastrous results for knowledge and progress. In such a situation, the absence of difference which an "other" might have provided renders indiscernible the arbitrariness of signification in the prevailing language, thus conferring on its effects the legitimacy and authority of determinate, constative meaning as if they were in fact representations of phenomena given to the understanding and not, as they are, impositions of form upon the accidental. Hegemony naturalizes the arbitrary, effacing the contingent and "performative" (what we have elsewhere referred to as the "material") element in the production of meaning, creating as it does untimely mirages of the unity which Priestley identifies strictly with nature, science, and the millennium. Any anxiety apparent in his theory of language stems from the possibility of such a short-circuiting of knowledge and the postponement of apocalypse which results.

And yet, this possibility arises from precisely the same unruly characteristic of language which Priestley identifies as one of humanity's greatest hopes for salvation: the arbitrariness of the relation between words and things which grants language the dynamically revisionary capacity to propel history towards the millennium. Such progress, however, is only possible if that arbitrariness is observable, a condition which demands the possibility that languages be compared. If such a contrast is impossible, and one language is able to posit its effects of truth without the restraint a second would
impose, any meaning generated by that language will seem necessary, given, and fixed rather than contingent, imposed, and provisional. In short, language’s status as an undetermined historical event is, in such circumstances, expunged and displaced by a monolithic effect of determined calculation. This, Priestley’s text suggests, is a catastrophe which allows error to establish itself as truth, thus retarding the progress of history.

In his *Lectures on Language*, Priestley seeks to counteract this aberrantly productive aspect of language by describing a range of different tongues in terms of the variations they exhibit within a number of traditional grammatical categories. Such a comparative survey, he maintains, is essential to the development of the sort of objective understanding of language which will enhance the advancement of knowledge. Indeed, he writes, "The little light that hath yet been struck out upon the subject of language in general hath resulted from the comparison of the properties of different languages actually subsisting" (*Language* 296), a process which his own work will continue. Of his project he writes:

This comparison will enable us to judge which is the most adequate and convenient method of expression, will discover what is defective, and what is redundant in the structure of any particular language, and direct to the most proper method of supplying the defect, or lessening the inconvenience arising from the superfluity. (7)

Although the ultimate goal of such comparisons is the realization of a universal, philosophical language, this passage suggests that Priestley employs the apparently descriptive method he does in order to minimize the possibility that the progress to that
end could be circumvented by the freak totalizing effects of which the performative element of language is capable. We could say, in fact, that Priestley's lectures on language mark, within the logic of the system they describe, an inaugural attempt to drive that performativity, and with it, its power to posit phenomena, out of language. For, although the performative is valorized in Priestley's teleological model of linguistic development, in the final analysis it remains a strictly "salutary" evil (297), necessary only insofar as it helps language to achieve the goal of pure constatation as it would be embodied in a philosophical language. Despite its role in bringing about the perfection of language, the performative lies in the long shadow the constative ideal casts from the end of history. Moreover, as an indication of the imperfection of the languages now in use, and thus of the inadequacy of human knowledge in its current state, the performative is a reminder of the remoteness of the millennium from the present, much as the post-lapsarian tongues were for Adamic-language theorists an index of the magnitude of humanity's fall.

Diversity in Priestley's text is ultimately a diversion which palliates the resistance which the material dimension of language marked by utterance poses to the possibility of the sort of absolute knowledge (or indeed, phenomenal knowledge) which he prophecies. Difference, Priestley contends, yields objective knowledge, in this case, about language. And yet, his text's emphasis on translation and comparison suggests that language is not simply one object of knowledge among others: no amount of translation, no amount of comparison, and indeed, no taxonomy of linguistic "objects" is sufficient to provide us
with the Archimedean perspective from which we may take in all of language "at one view" (Language 182). Such perfect knowledge can only be predicted, but prediction, as we shall see, is an act which implies the impossibility of the sort of comprehensivity which Priestley foretells. Indeed, if we forget the future philosophical language Priestley predicts and consider instead the "material" or "performative" dimension of language his text emphasizes, language seems to be not a coherent object but rather a disruptive movement of radical difference. Nevertheless, in motivating difference by making it a precondition of a final, all-encompassing knowledge in which difference will be "exterminated," Priestley sublimates the threat which that radical difference and the material dimension it marks (both of language and history) pose, certainly to the sort of totalized future knowledge he predicts, but also to the "partial" knowledge we experience in the present.

The distinction Priestley draws between the imperfect, predominantly performative language of the present, and the constative, philosophical language of the future, conforms to the opposition between science and art which runs through the Lectures. A philosophical language, for example, is coextensive for Priestley with science. Both provide unequivocal representations of nature and, as such, are continuous with the uniformity Priestley attributes to it, and which he identifies with "truth." Like science, a philosophical language is "the same in all places, and in all times" (Rudiments 59): transcending the error and caprice of everyday discourse, both participate in the universality of truth which, "whether geometrical, metaphysical, moral, or theological,
is of the same nature, and the evidence of it is perceived in a similar manner by the same
human minds" (*Oratory* 45). On the other hand, Priestley associates all pre-philosophical
languages with "art." Ungrounded in nature, and "regulated by mere custom" (*Language*
226), language shares none of the homogeneity and universality Priestley identifies with
science and truth. Instead, it is marked by the "inconsistencies," "redundancies," and
"defects" (115-6) of convention.

It is clear then that, while Priestley deems the diversity of languages in the world
a necessary evil, the fundamental arbitrariness which gives rise to those differences
remains a potential source of disruption in his system. Linguistic arbitrariness is
concomitant with the incomplete nature of pre-millennial human understanding which
Priestley describes in *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*. He writes,
"We ourselves, complex as the structure of our minds and our principles of action are,
are links in a great connected chain, parts of an immense whole, a very little of which
we are as yet permitted to see" (viii). Even if we may, from this perspective "collect
evidence enough that the whole system (in which we are at the same time both
instruments and objects) is under an unerring direction, and that the final result will be
most glorious and happy" (viii), our knowledge of the world, and with it our knowledge
of language is, for now, imperfect. Not yet inhabiting that Archimedean point at the end
of history from which we may "see the whole at one view" and thus "establish laws that
have no exception" (*Language* 115), we sometimes do not know what we do not know
or worse, we do not know *that* we do not know. For Priestley, language plays a crucial
role in creating the hallucinations of knowledge which disguise our ignorance and errors from us. Despite this, however, we must still, when it comes to discourse, "conform to established vicious practices, if we would not make ourselves justly ridiculous by our singularity" (Language 116).

There is an important distinction to be made, however, between giving in to convention as a matter of expediency, and being taken in by its arbitrary effects of meaning. The latter is always a possibility for, without the sort of quasi-scientific knowledge an empirical comparison of multilingual grammatical data might yield, single-language users (individuals or cultures) are always in danger of mistaking the random patterns of "association and analogy" which occur among the material elements of that language for motivated, representational significations. The comparison of languages reveals the contingent nature of such effects. If no comparisons are possible, however, those patterns create a diversion of coherency which effaces the arbitrariness -- that is, the sheer incommensurability of meaning with the devices which produce it -- of the performative gesture which brings them into being, producing an effect of reference and thus of a referent and so cognition. When this occurs, contingent events of relation are taken for determinate instances of reference.

In its capacity to induce constative effects without regard to nature or to truth, performativity, if left unchecked, represents an excess of linguistic operation which threatens to undo the validity of any claim to knowledge, including those advanced by science. If cognition is sometimes an effect of a random imposition of form or pattern
upon the materiality of any arbitrary, performative event, who can say that it is not always so? This is not an error, it seems, that we can ever be absolutely certain we stand outside of.

For Priestley, however, science marks just such an outer limit of error. On the near side of this absolute cognitive horizon lies the realm of human history, and with it the mirages of truth generated by contingency; on the far side, Priestley promises, lie the absolute truths of scientific knowledge. The authority he accords this sublime category depends ultimately, however, on the possibility that all error may be confined to the human side of the boundary. This he does by attributing all false effects of reference and cognition to the partial vision of the world which he associates with the arts, including language. Although grounded in "natural principles" (Language 5), the arts are governed by convention and thus are subject to the inconsistencies which result from the imperfect nature of pre-millennial human knowledge. In the same way, Priestley argues, languages, "like all other arts which owe their cultivation, if not their invention, to men, which subsist by their use of them, . . . are daily subject to human caprice" (168).

What remains uncertain, however, is whether this capriciousness is properly human, or if it in fact embodies something horrible, as its etymology suggests. Notions such as "caprice" and "fashion" imply a modicum of human agency which, however unruly, is not necessarily commensurate with the radically contingent nature of the performativity Priestley's theory ascribes to language. "Unconnected and abrupt" (Frey 132), the arbitrariness of performativity involves more than just convention's
random connection of words with ideas and things: it extends to the absolute irrelation of the positional gesture by which language comes into being from anything that precedes or follows it, and the utter indifference of that event to meaning. In its blank materiality, such an occurrence represents nothing but the unrepresentable fact of its own coming into being, and this fact, simple but not coherent, is, as de Man bluntly puts it, "the only thing we actually get" (HI 42). Furthermore, as the condition of possibility of representation and reference, this undecidably significative material element of discourse exceeds representability and thus blocks any attempt, such as that which Priestley proposes, to describe language exhaustively in empirical terms. In fact, as the precondition of any taxonomic representation of the world, the material and performative element of language will surpass all efforts to circumscribe its operations within the bounds of any single category, including "the human." The point is homologous to what Barbara Johnson calls "de Man's central insight: that language, since it is . . . constitutive of the human, cannot itself be entirely 'human'" (6). She explains:

As the ground of possibility of expressive intentionality, language cannot itself be entirely reduced to interpretability. This does not mean that language never means, but rather that beyond the apparent meaning, and even beyond the suppressed or hidden meanings (unconscious, poetic, ideological, counterdiscursive), there can always be a residue of functioning -- which produces effects -- that is not a sign of anything, but merely the outcome of linguistic rules, or even of "the absolute randomness of language." Not that language is always absolutely random, but that we can never be sure that it isn't. (6)

We can never be certain what language would look like from outside the horizon of its effects. As such, we can never be sure "that language is in any sense human" (de Man,
A "residue of functioning" will always remain, conditioning meaning from the far side of intelligibility where it remains, unnameable and "totally indifferent in relation to the human" (96) yet, at the same time, capable of performatively disrupting any claim to knowledge -- including all knowledge about "the human" -- abruptly and arbitrarily.

In assimilating this chance element to a certain cognitive whimsicality which he locates in the human, Priestley is blinded to the more primordial capriciousness which adheres in the very performativity his theory of language describes. According to this possibility, "the human" -- like any cognitive totalization -- is an effect of the effacement of the incoherence of the unmotivated event by which language brings itself into being or posits itself, thus creating all effects of phenomenality. To acknowledge the fundamental independence of this epistemological process from the ontological category Priestley calls "Nature," however, is to witness the horror of "the undoing of cognition and its replacement by the uncontrollable power of the letter as inscription" (de Man, HI 37). Language's only brush with the "material," we should recall, occurs in the instant in which it turns itself away from the incoherent violence of the event of its own coming into being -- its inscription -- and it is to this purposeless opening of a space between "represented and representer," that language can only ever actually "refer." Because it points to the unnameable random event which precipitates reference's possibility, there is no proper, literal ground for this reference. Nonetheless, all other effects of reference, including those of constative language, phenomenal intuition, and the intuiting human subject, follow from the resistance "felt" in language's inaugural performative gesture,
however unmotivated and groundless the fact of that event might be. At the same time, however, the material element inscribed with this event always retains the capacity to break up any such totalized figures of knowledge, based as they are on the provisional effacement of the indeterminacy and heterogeneity of the materiality of language.

In Priestley's theory of language, the Millennium palliates the disruptive force of the performative by grounding its apparent arbitrariness in the necessity of Providence. Millennialism promises that, although language seems imperfect now, its capriciousness is motivated retroactively by the purely constative mode of expression its performative processes will yield with the end of history. And yet, this purity is possible only because the contingent and arbitrary dimension of language has been localized in a transitory function of history called "man" and thus contained in a circumscribed area of the Providential plot. Without such a teleological structure to arrest its unsettling movements, the performative would be free to unleash a capricious force which would render the determinacy of any constative claim undecidable.

Such gestures of containment, however, merely simulate the tropological effacement of performativity which produces constative effects, including those which Priestley identifies with science. "The same in all places, and in all times" (Rudiments 58), "true" science subsumes differences and transcends error. It is an objective, ahistorical domain of knowledge, immune to contingency and coextensive with truth. This identity, however, can only be figured by way of a diversion of the excess of
linguistic functioning which occurs in the historically-specific performative event constitutive of any truth claim through the coherent totality of a providential history.

The stability of Priestley's linguistic, historical, and epistemological models depends on the diversion -- indeed, the sublimation -- and thus the palliation of this surplus which, because it is the condition of the possibility of all constative effects, is that which will not be described and thus that which ultimately defies science's constative imperative. In fact, in Priestley's Lectures, science's claim to a universal, transhistorical mode of knowledge rests largely on the declaration or, more precisely, the prediction, of its ability to circumscribe and transcend the aberrant effects of human and linguistic "caprice" rather than on the actual fulfilment of this promise. The scientific "truths" of Priestley's system are thus grounded not in any universally consistent facts of empirical evidence, but rather in the erasure of the overdetermined fact -- the historicity -- of language's materiality, an effacement which can only be anticipated but never realized. In other words, whatever success, or apparent success, science achieves in restricting the disruptive capacity of performative language is the product of a prediction or prophecy, a gesture which is itself performative.20

4. Prophecy as Event

The production of constative effects by way of such a compounding of performatives is particularly apparent in the apocalyptic flourish with which Priestley closes his final lecture. In this moment, the descriptive tone in which he has presented
his theory so far is suspended as he declares the possibility of the "extermination" of "the diversity of languages, when it [the diversity] hath compleatly answered all the present uses of it" (302). Although apparently at odds with the overall mode of Priestley's lectures, such a prediction (whether merely implied as it is in the notion of scientific progress or explicitly stated in the sort of millennial terms we have here) is necessary if the descriptive method Priestley employs is to be distinguished from the disruptive performative element it seeks to displace. The authority of scientific discourse depends on its apparent universality and objectivity, that is, on its transcendence of contingency. In Priestley's theory, this overcoming of the accidental is implied in what is in effect the promise of a continuous, consequential link between the constative mode of science and the establishment of "laws which have no exceptions" (115), an eventuality identified with the absolute knowledge of the millennium and with truth. But such a relationship can never be properly known, it can only be predicted as Priestley does here. As such, the surety of science depends on a prophetic gesture.

Austin lists "prophecy" among those speech acts such as stating, affirming, denying, emphasizing, illustrating, answering (162) which involve "the expounding of views, the conducting of arguments, and the clarifying of usages and references" (161). Utterances of this class are noteworthy for the manner in which they link performative verbs "with clauses that look like 'statements', true or false" (86). "For example," Austin explains, "when I say 'I prophesy that . . .', 'I concede that . . .', 'I postulate that . . .', the clause following will normally look just like a statement, but the verbs
themselves seem to be pure performatives" (86). Furthermore, although Austin does not comment on it, prophecy brings the performative and constative together in a manner which vividly demonstrates the aporetic relation obtaining between them.

In 1736, Joseph Butler wrote, "... prophecy is nothing but the history of events before they come to pass" (qtd. in Balfour 126). As Ian Balfour has pointed out, this constative notion of prophecy is typical of the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The conditions constitutive of such an effect of reference as we have with prophecy, however, actually differ little from those of any other utterance, despite its mystical aura: the constative effect of prophecy is a product of the erasure of a historically specific and undecidably significative performative gesture by a tropological reflex which takes the materiality of that event (at the very instant in which it turns away from its disarticulating force) "as a guarantee of the phenomenality of experience" (Chase 105). Typically, the determinate form of the referent is assumed to be "given" to perception rather than imposed by a process which, because it is the condition of possibility of cognition, is itself without determinable shape or purpose and thus unavailable as an object of knowledge. The explicitly temporal -- and specifically future -- referent of the predicate of prophecy, however, suggests the impossible, paradoxical conditions which would have to be in place for this or any utterance to be properly constative. Prophetic efficacy depends, like Priestley's "science," on the reification of history. There is no room for arbitrariness in the providential plan, whether in the programmed sequence of historical events, or in the determinate relationship of that
process to cognition and language: prophecy implies the phenomenality of the historical dimension of the world, and with it the eventual intuitability of its processes. If this were the case, however, history would be an absolutely self-identical site of sheer calculation in which the sort of arbitrary gesture, or accident, which opens the space necessary for language to take place and stand forth as such would be impossible. Prophecy, in other words, assumes a programmed, determined history which, if it were in fact the case, would leave no room for the sort of contingency which is the precondition of all linguistic acts, including prophecy. For a prophecy to be true, prophecy would have to be impossible.

The impossible erasure of the contingent dimension of prophecy by its positing of a reified historical narrative, suggests the degree to which all discourse is historically-specific and thus ideological. Perhaps more transparently than other utterances, but certainly no differently from them, prophecy derives its efficacy from its erasure of its own historical-ideological context. To repeat: prophecy’s effect of reference to the future is possible only by way of a repression of the radical randomness of the performative element in such an utterance, and thus the effacement of the incommensurability of that event with the sort of uniform history it posits. Prophecy’s reference to the future diverts attention from the fact -- and it is a political fact -- of prophecy’s taking place, that is, its relation to the moment in which it is performed. Such a diversion naturalizes and elides the overdetermined undecidability of that moment,
effacing its arbitrariness (and with it all the possibilities, political and otherwise, which it implies) by inscribing it in the apparently pre-determined history it posits.

Prophecy thus has as much to do with the present as it does with the future. And it is thoroughly political. As Balfour notes:

> even when prophecy takes the form of prediction -- by no means its only form -- its function is not so much to provide knowledge of the future as to persuade an audience in the present. As Max Weber saw clearly, Hebrew prophecy is the earliest form of political literature, the ancestor of the modern-day pamphlet. (117)

The political force of Priestley's *Lectures* adheres in its inscription of performativity within its representation of language, and the disruption of the coherency of any claim to totalized knowledge, including its own, which results. In this, his theory offers a simulacrum of the process by which the arbitrariness of the performative element of any utterance, including arguments about language and knowledge, is erased by the constative effect that that arbitrary event induces. But with one difference. The *Lectures* promise a descriptive analysis of the various properties and permutations of language in the world, but the efficacy of this representation depends on the erasure of the arbitrariness of the performative gesture -- prophecy -- which posits the reified providential history, along with its millennial climax of linguistic and cognitive presence, in which those claims are grounded. And yet, the erasure of the performative remains incomplete in Priestley's *Lectures*, as it does in all prophecies and, less obviously, in all utterances. With prophecy, a peculiar cognitive lag obtains between utterance and its putative reference. This gap will only be closed when the prophecy is realized which, in the case of
Priestley’s *Lectures*, is with the end of history. Until then, an excess of non-cognitive linguistic functioning persists, not totally effaced by the effect of "future history" its utterance produces, but foregrounded by the deferral of referential closure (in this case, to the millennium) that that effect entails.

Therefore, although Priestley’s theory cannot properly describe the performative, material element of language (no theory could), it does inscribe it, albeit in the shadow of its certain extermination, as a gap or lag in reference. By displacing the locus of the connection between "words and things" from the past or the present to the future, Priestley’s text opens a pocket in language and in history in which meaning is not present and determined, but only promised and undecidable. If a word’s meaning is the role it plays in either hastening or delaying the apocalypse, "meaning" is something which can only be known with any certainty at that apocalyptic moment. For now all we get is the "fact" of language, a space or position in which meaning is not determined. That space is a site of decision, not prescription and, as such, by inscribing it in his theory, Priestley foregrounds language as an "event" rather than as a monument.

Furthermore, in simulating as it does the mechanism of performative inscription and figural effacement constitutive of all cognitive effects, Priestley’s *Lectures* suggests the extent to which all claims to knowledge seek to establish a hegemony which will efface the arbitrariness of the processes of their production, thus naturalizing those claims and creating an effect of truth which legitimizes the authority of those who posit them. By inscribing performativity in his description of language, Priestley opens, however
provisionally, a space for contingency in the necessity of Providential history -- precisely that, in other words, which Johnson seeks to exile from language. The effect of Priestley's radical gesture is to foreground the historicity of language by locating it in the context of a network of historically-specific forces, including political forces, where it becomes a locus in a dynamically revisionary struggle towards meaning. To offer this space to his Warrington students as Priestley did, was to offer them an opportunity to contest and revise meaning and with it, the relations of power and knowledge with which language is coextensive, something which no prescriptive, normative grammar could do.
Chapter Seven

History as Diversion:

John Horne Toke and the Politics of Difference

Works such as Hans Aarsleff's *The Study of Language in England 1780-1860* granted new respectability to an area of intellectual history which he later described as "much like an orphan, an embarrassment nobody wanted to get to know" when he found it in the late 1950s. In addition to this, they stimulated fresh curiosity in a number of eighteenth-century linguistic theorists whose apparent blunders subsequent generations had done their best to forget. Of these, none is more remarkable than John Horne Toke, the English radical whose empirical study of language, *EPEA PTEROENTA, or the Diversions of Purley*, published between 1786 and 1805, was the most influential linguistic treatise of its day in Britain. Based on a materialist conception of mind, and filled with over 2,000 often incredible etymological proofs, Tooke's work remained popular until the 1830s when the "new philology," against which Aarsleff says the *Diversions* had served as a bulwark, began to make its first incursions from the Continent. Thus displaced from its dominant position, the *Diversions* became an object of scorn, sliding into an obscurity from which it would probably not have escaped for some time had Aarsleff not challenged the positivistic mode of linguistic historiography which he says prevailed in

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the late 1950's when he began researching his book (vi). Teleological notions of linguistic history "as a record of steady progress toward increasingly legitimate scientificness" (vi) left no place for such apparently Quixotic purveyors of error as Tooke. But Aarsleff, as we have said, wasn't concerned with which linguistic ideas hindsight judged as right or wrong: he was interested in the socio-cultural context of all of those ideas. Only by taking in the big picture, he maintained, would it be possible to produce "a coherent history with the sort of explanatory and enlightening quality we seek in history, even if the goal is rarely fully achieved" (vi).

Although superfluous to a positivistic history of linguistic thought, any figure who commanded the attention of his day like Tooke did his was indispensable to a contextual approach such as Aarsleff's. And yet, the integration of the *Diversions* into such a history is not without its problems. Tooke's work makes evident the sort of tensions which arise when historians of the study of language attempt to assign to any text a place in a "coherent history with the sort of explanatory and enlightening quality we seek in history" (vi). Complicated by its focus on language, linguistic historiography invariably makes evident pressures perhaps more easily overlooked in other sorts of historical writing. We have so far seen these pressures exert their disfiguring force in our readings of Locke, Johnson, and Priestley. In *The Diversions of Purley* what becomes apparent is the fact that the sort of historical coherency Aarsleff desires can only emerge by way of an historiographical exclusion of a radically incoherent dimension of the source text.
Aarsleff's *Study*, is based in part on a recognition that the apparent coherency of the positivists' histories of language was the result of a frame of reference which excluded as external to its own unity the intellectual, cultural and institutional contexts of the various linguistic theories it represented (vi). The recognition of such a frame dissolves the hallucination of historical coherency, which can then only be restored by calling that particular representation of events "not history" or, as Aarsleff does, too "internal" (vi), and then widening the frame to include that which had previously been left out. Aarsleff's response to the positivists, for example, is to take a "radically different course by including . . . external and extra-linguistic factors" (vi). In considering these elements, he is able to place Tooke's efforts to demonstrate that the operations attributed in his day to the mind, were in fact "merely the operations of Language" (i, 51) within the context of the general preoccupation in eighteenth-century Britain with the philosophical question of the relationship of the mind and language.

A more recent book, however, which includes a substantial reconsideration of Tooke's ideas, suggests that, even with its inclusion of certain "extra-linguistic factors," Aarsleff's work is itself marked by a peculiar sort of blindness and exclusivity which compromises its coherency and explanatory force. In *The Politics of Language 1791-1819*, Olivia Smith argues that "late eighteenth-century theories of language were centrally and explicitly concerned with class division and that they cannot be entirely understood without their political component being taken into account" (viii). Tooke's work is no exception to this rule; in fact, Smith writes, "[t]he *Diversion* loses fullness
and range when its political component is not taken into account" (116). Aarsleff's discussion of Tooke, however, is free of any sustained consideration of such matters, a curious omission, as curious perhaps as the positivist historians' elision of error in their efforts to "create the vision of nearly unobstructed progress" (Aarsleff vi). Even if one was unaware of a few facts of Tooke's biography -- his association with Wilkes, his trial for sedition in 1777 and year's confinement in the king's bench prison, his arrest without charge in 1794 and subsequent seven months of imprisonment after which he was tried and found not guilty on a charge of high treason -- it is difficult to overlook the many explicitly political statements made throughout The Diversions of Purley. Smith certainly was not the first to notice these. Coleridge, for example, commenting on Tooke's tendency to mix politics and etymology, wrote that it took "a base and unpoetical mind to convert so beautiful, so divine a subject as language, into the vehicle or make weight of political squibs" (qtd. in Yarborough 117-18). But for Smith, the coherency not only of her history of late eighteenth-century theories of language, but also of Tooke's work, depends on a consideration of precisely those squibs elided by Aarsleff and others. As she notes, "the political impetus and content of the Diversions grants it cohesiveness and direction" (139).

Cohesiveness, it should be clear, comes only by excluding that which might render any text or argument incoherent. And incoherence, as poststructuralist theory has demonstrated, is most likely to manifest itself in the rhetoric of a text. Any coherency therefore which either Aarsleff or Smith may claim for Tooke's work or for their own
particular histories is necessarily based, in part, on the elision in both of their arguments of any significant examination of the rhetorical complexity of the *Divisions*. Such an omission is particularly strange because it amounts to a refusal to discuss the language employed in a work explicitly about language.¹

The rhetoric of the *Divisions*, in fact, follows a pattern which, if it were acknowledged by these historians, would undermine any grounds from which they might be able to claim an unproblematized historical coherency for Tooke’s work or for their own. The notion of "historical coherency," with its suggestion of a unified object, gives temporality the sort of dead weight which the *Divisions* resists at every turn. The site of this resistance is the rhetoric of Tooke’s work, which restlessly displaces the figures of identity necessary for a determinate conception of history and language, with figures of historical discontinuity and linguistic difference. In order to place *The Diversions of Purley* within a history conceived as a coherency, the historian must overlook these rhetorical disturbances, along with their suggestion that "historical coherency" is an effect made possible only by means of a suppression of difference.

The aversion to figures of identity is never articulated in the positive form of a thesis in the *Divisions*. Rather, it exerts its disfiguring force in the diversionary relationship between history and language that Tooke’s work implicitly describes. This relationship is characterized by diversion in two senses: first, as a re-routing or a detour of history through language and of language through history; and second, as a
manoeuvre, simultaneous with the first, which distracts attention from the fact that any such re-routing takes place.

First then, Tooke's work suggests that neither history nor language possesses a determinate, coherent character: each is constituted by its interaction with, or more precisely, by its diversion through, the other. Tooke, for example, disrupts the identity between the word and the thing or idea it represents, common to the atomistic conceptions of meaning current in his day, by introducing the element of history into signification. This he does by way of his notion of abbreviation. Although Tooke claims that all words are ultimately the names of simple sense impressions received by a passive mind, he divides words into two groups according to whether their signification is direct or indirect. Nouns and verbs refer directly to simple ideas, but abbreviations -- all of those other parts of speech which Locke lumped together as "particles" -- refer to nouns or to verbs and, only by way of them, to simple ideas. As Tilottama Rajan notes (Supplement 21), such a strategy may allow Tooke to ground meaning in a mental referent, but the distinction he makes between direct and indirect modes of signification raises the possibility that meaning is, at least partly, a product not of the reference of word to thing or idea, and therefore positive, but of word to word, and therefore relational. As Jacques Derrida has argued ("Différance 1-27), the notion of relational meaning bears with it not only the Saussurean idea that signification is a product of difference, but also introduces the element of deferral into signification. Accordingly, we find that with his idea of abbreviation, Tooke interrupts the immediacy of reference
from word to thing or idea with the delay imposed by an intervening reference from the
abbreviation to the noun or verb for which it stands. Meaning is deferred, however, in
an even more disruptive manner in Tooke's system, by the fact that the relationship
between the abbreviation and the noun or verb to which it refers is a historical one, based
on the corruption of the latter in the interests of greater "dispatch" in communication (i,
27). Abbreviation is a sort of shorthand which, through a process of elision and
condensation, substitutes one word for several nouns or verbs, and thus frees speakers
from the labourious process of having to articulate the sequence of words which stand
directly for the simple ideas they wish to express and so adds "such wings to their
conversation as might enable it, if possible to keep pace in some measure with their
minds" (i, 29). As Tooke says in the Diversions, "Words have been called winged: and
they well deserve that name, when their abbreviations are compared with the progress
which speech could make without these inventions" (i, 28). What is gained in dispatch,
however, is lost in "intelligibility" (i, 399). In order to determine the "true" meaning of
a word, one must be able to trace the abbreviation back to the noun or verb of which it
is a corruption: the simple idea for which that noun or verb stands will be the meaning
of the abbreviation. The need for this process suggests an absence of "present meaning"
which even Tooke's thousands of etymologies can do little to allay.

But just as Tooke interrupts the possibility of any sort of simple and immediate
identification between signifier and signified with a historical deferral, he also disrupts
the idea of a historical coherency between past and present by suggesting the linguistic
or, more specifically, the rhetorical nature of any model which posits the likelihood of continuous, transtemporal identity. In the *Diversions*, where etymology is paradigmatic of history, Tooke's awareness of the shaping role of figurative language in any conception of history is apparent in his criticism of the metaphors which control the word histories of other etymologists who, he says, have never yet:

ventured to ask themselves, what they mean; when they say that any word *comes* from, is *derived* from, *produced* from, *originates* from, or *gives birth* to, any other word. Their ignorance and idleness make them contented with this vague and misapplied metaphorical language: and if we should beg them to consider that words have no *loco-motive* faculty, that they do not *flow* like rivers, nor *vegetate* like plants, nor *spiculate* like salts, nor are *generated* like animals; they would say, we quibbled with them. (i, 259-60)

As we shall see, this rejection of a genetic conception of etymology is coextensive with the displacement in the *Diversions* of an organic notion of history such as we find in Johnson with a model marked by difference and contingency.

In suggesting that signification is diverted through history, and that our understanding of history is diverted through language, Tooke's text hints at the absence of any essential self-identity in either language or history. The supplementary detour through alterity, however, is also that which creates the effect of presence and identity which allows us to conceive of historical coherency or positive meaning. This effect, Tooke's work demonstrates, is a diversion of the second sort, that is, of a manoeuvre which turns our attention from something else, in this case, from the absence of any self-
identical essence in either history or language, and from the diversionary chiasmus constitutive of both.

The *Diversions*, however, is further marked by an awareness that this absence, which the ruses of presence may prohibit us from viewing, is also a locus of power. To control this space, to efface this void is to regulate through various discursive acts of inclusion and exclusion the definition of "truth" (posing as a discovery of truth), or "reality" which, in turn, is the diversion which diverts our attention away from the absence which is the precondition for the positing of any such truth.

Tooke's work resists and disrupts this closed system of "truth" and the exercise of power it disguises by displacing the models of identity, continuity, and coherency on which it depends with those of difference. It is difference, after all, and the diversionary relations between history and language, which are suppressed by any truth claim that posits history or language as an autonomous, self-sufficient object of knowledge; furthermore, such objectifications divert attention from the web of supplementary relations which are the precondition of the "truths" they apparently represent.

There are various points at which Tooke's text displaces the "present," but the strategy is invariably similar. The displacement is broached by the creation of a space from which history, power, or language is apparently excluded. This exclusion, however, is only a denial of history, power, or language in a positive form and as such it mirrors the suppression of difference constitutive of any coherent truth claim. Where the determinate presence of positive truth claims diverts attention from the suppression
of difference which is their possibility, the exclusion of the identical at various points in Tooke’s text allows for the manifestation of difference: it is hard to create a diversion with a ghost. What we note, however, is the manner in which that cancelled presence continues to haunt the space from which it has been excluded, exerting the pressure of its absence on those others -- like mourners of presence -- left behind, through which the traces of its own revoked identity are necessarily diverted, and whose identities are similarly routed through that of the one lost. For this is no simple reversal: in exchanging the exclusion of difference, and the diversionary tactics of presence for the exclusion of identity and the haunted detours of absence, Tooke’s text creates a space of resistance which ultimately undermines the integrality of the elements in such binary oppositions as inside/outside and presence/absence on which any conception of history or language as determinate objects of knowledge is grounded. And, in so doing, Tooke’s work displaces a diversionary politics of presence -- that is, a politics based on the *legerdemain* of "identity" -- with a politics alert to the workings of difference and its reality effects -- a politics of supplementarity.

The *Diversions* provides an allegory of this process in its opening pages. There we meet the three participants who will take part in the first volume of the dialogue: Dr. Richard Beadon (B.), a friend of Tooke’s from Cambridge who, at the time of the *Diversions*, was Master of Jesus College; William Tooke (T.), a political supporter and friend of the author at whose country seat, Purley Lodge, the "diversions" take place; and the author (H.), who would adopt William Tooke’s surname in 1783. First to speak is
B. who, apparently having just discovered H. at Purley, claims he now understands the reason for his friend’s attraction to the estate. B. says to their host:

--The mystery is at last unravelled. I shall no more wonder now that you engross his company at Purley, whilst his other friends can scarce get a sight of him. This, you say, was President Bradshaw's seat. That is the secret of his attachment to the place. You hold him by the best security, his political prejudices and enthusiasm. But do not let his veneration for the memory of the antient possessor pass upon you for affection to the present. (i, 1)

B.'s reasoning seems plausible: John Bradshaw, who had occupied Purley a century before, had been a lawyer, a profession for which Tooke showed great interest and aptitude, although his applications for admission to the bar were repeatedly rejected. Bradshaw, however, was also the presiding judge who pronounced the death sentence on Charles I in 1649, a qualification sure to be of some interest to the author for, as Minnie Yarborough notes in her biography of Tooke, "though he was never a republican as Milton was . . . [Tooke] was at one with the poet in his attitude toward Charles I" (7). But, given the opportunity to identify with such an historic enemy of tyranny as Bradshaw, the radical Tooke, after a brief outburst in defence of his own political principles, denies any such basis for his attraction to Purley. Instead, he maintains that the appeal of William Tooke's country seat lies simply in the pleasant diversions of the moment which it offers. H. says:

But are you really forced to go above a hundred years back to account for my attachment to Purley? Without considering the many strong public and private ties by which I am bound to its present possessor, can you find nothing in the beautiful prospect from these windows? nothing in the entertainment every one receives in this house? nothing in the delightful
rides and walks we have taken round it? nothing in the cheerful disposition
and easy kindness of its owner, to make a rational man partial to this
habitation? (i, 2-3)

The sense that Purley represents a retreat from such temporal matters as the killing of
kings is confirmed by the host, who says to B., concerning H.'s remarks:

Sir, you are making him transgress our only standing rules. Politics and
compliments are strangers here. We always put them off when we put on
our boots; and leave them behind us in their proper atmosphere, the smoke
of London (i, 3).

But this is a smoke screen: in forbidding the historical identification of H. with the
regicide Bradshaw, and prohibiting the consideration of political topics, Tooke's text
creates a space from which both history and politics are apparently rendered "strangers."
This gesture, however, excludes only a particular, positive conception of history and
power: it is the suppression of a supra-individual idea of history that would allow the
sort of simple typological identification of a seventeenth-century regicide with an
eighteenth-century radical liberal, and it is the exclusion of a determinate notion of power
that would lead one to believe that one could escape its workings as easily as one might
quit "the smoke of London." The exclusion of such notions of power and history,
however, clears a space in which we may consider them differentially: unlike the ploys
of presence which pose as coherent truths but conceal the absence of truth, the diversions
of Purley -- or at least the diversion to which we are witness, the dialogue -- draws
attention to the manner in which the excluded presences of history and politics continue
to inform and preoccupy the text, despite the explicit interdiction of the host.
Undoubtedly, readers familiar with Tooke's life would have responded to T.'s prohibition against the political with no less incredulity than B., who proclaims:

Is it possible! Can either of you — Englishmen and patriots! — abstain for four and twenty hours together from politics? You cannot be always on horseback or at piquet. What, in the name of wonder, your favourite topic excluded, can be the subject of your so frequent conversations? (1,3).

The subject, of course, is language. But in Tooke's work this is hardly an inviolate, apolitical space. For example, he makes no effort to restrict his political comments to the non-dialogical portions of the text, such as the footnotes and "advertisements" where they frequently appear: H. presents his theory to his interlocutors bristling with political invective and innuendo. Indeed, as Yarborough points out, even his etymological proofs combine linguistic with political instruction (118). H., for example, uses his explanation of the relationship between the preposition "beneath" and the noun "nether" as a pretext for urging parliamentary reform. He comments:

The word _Nether_ is indeed at present fallen into great contempt, and is rarely used but in ridicule and with scorn: and this may possibly have arisen from its former application to the house of commons, ancienly called (by Henry 8) "The NETHER house of parliament." That the word should thus have fallen into disgrace is nothing wonderful: for in truth this _Nether end_ of our parliament has for a long time past been a mere sham and mockery of representation, but is now become an impudent and barefaced usurpation of the rights of the people (i, 406-7).

Such comments, although provocative, serve ultimately to divert attention from the more general political agenda which informs the text. Olivia Smith has done much to point out that the _Diversions_ is paradigmatic of a general awareness among the English radicals of the 1790s that a redefinition of language was crucial to social change.
Tooke's text represented a challenge to the authority of a classically-educated elite who propagated rationalist linguistic theories which, in claiming language-use to be a reflection of mental ability, led to the definition of "the vulgar as a group whose mentality was inferior to those who were allegedly civilized" (Smith 140), and thus legitimized "language as a means of class division" (113). Smith writes, "By disrupting the ideological construct of language's relation to the mind and 'civilization', Tooke refuted the major philosophical justification of class division in the last half of the century, and the myriad ideas which depended on it" (130). The purported exclusion of politics from William Tooke's estate, and thus from John Horne Tooke's discussion of language, opens a space beyond the diversions created by power, language, or history conceived positively as "politics," "sign," or "event," and permits the descriptive tracing of the web of supplementary relations which circulate among the three. Moreover, just as the exclusion of "politics" from Purley will allow for a recognition of the relational nature of power, Tooke's refusal to identify with the historical figure of Bradshaw amounts to an unwillingness to embrace history as a continuum of related but isolatable events and personages. Tooke rather considers history as a weave of differential relations in which each such "event" is overdetermined and thus beyond coherent representation. As Michael Ryan has noted, "to isolate a single event in history . . . is to a certain extent to overlook history" (24).

Just as Tooke's text clears the way for a different conception of power and history through the apparent exclusion of both from Purley, the *Diversions* goes some way
towards opening a space from which the distracting presences induced by positivistic conceptions of signification may be resisted. Again, this space is opened by way of a series of exclusions, one of which is produced by the *a priori* system of mind and meaning which H. claims he was compelled to devise. In the introductory chapter, he tells his interlocutors:

I very early found it, or thought I found it, impossible to make many steps in the search after *truth* and the nature of *human understanding*, of *good* and *evil*, of *right* and *wrong*, without well considering the nature of language, which appeared to me to be inseparably connected with them. I own therefore I long since formed to myself a kind of system, which seemed to me of singular use in the very small extent of my younger studies to keep my mind from confusion and the imposition of words. (i, 12- 13)

Tooke's system of language is thus created to provide a sanctuary from language, or more specifically, from the power of words silently to divert and confound understanding. The need for such a system is based on a Lockean assumption that misconceptions in philosophical and other matters are often the result of linguistic confusion. For Locke, such confusion arises from the imperfect nature of the acts constitutive of language. Because the relation between a word and the idea for which it stands is arbitrary, we must assign words to our ideas "voluntarily." But because our ideas are "invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear" (405), the ideas with which an individual associates a particular word remain locked in an unbreachable subjectivity. Thus we have no assurances that we understand one another when we communicate. For Locke, these imperfections of language are the cause of misconceptions in understanding
and knowledge. For Tooke, however, it is not the imperfections of language, but rather
"the perfections of Language, not properly understood [which] have been one of the chief
causes of the imperfections of our philosophy" (i, 37). This misunderstanding of
language is one point in a cycle of error, perpetuated by the claims of philosophers in all
areas of "Metaphysics," by which Tooke tells us he means "all general reasoning, all
Politics, Law, Morality and Divinity" (ii, 121). These claims, in turn, substantiate the
mistaken notions of language on which they are based, creating a logic of the same in
which error corroborates error.

For example, Tooke says that those who have previously thought about language
have been wrong in taking its sole purpose to be communication. This misconception led
thinkers initially to reason that words are simply the signs of things and that therefore
there must be "as many words, or parts of speech, as there are sorts of things" (i, 18).
In equating words and things, inquirers were led into all manner of squabbles as they
tried to determine the number of sorts of things there were, and thus the number of parts
of speech, or vice versa. For Tooke, the more recent notion that words are the signs of
ideas did nothing to alter this wild-goose chase. As he says:

Grammarians have since pursued just the same method with mind, as had
before been done with things. The different operations of the mind, are
to account now for what the different things were to account before: and
when they are not found sufficiently numerous for the purpose; it is only
supposing an imaginary operation or two, and the difficulties are for the
time shuffled over. So that the very same game has been played over
again with ideas, which was before played with things. (i, 23-4)
The mistaken notion that language's only purpose is the communication of thoughts thus led philosophers to the rationalist conclusion that the different parts of speech reflect the various operations of the mind. For Tooke, this is one more example of the way in which a linguistic misconception may be productive of errors of knowledge. The cycle may be broken, however, by re-examining the ideas about language on which such claims to knowledge are based. Such a reconsideration permits Tooke to recognize that, although the first aim of language is certainly to communicate thoughts, the second is to do so "with dispatch" (i, 27). As we have seen, the agent of this purpose of language is abbreviation. Thus, Tooke states:

the errors of Grammarians have arisen from supposing all words to be immediately either the signs of things or the signs of ideas: whereas in fact many words are merely abbreviations employed for dispatch, and are the signs of other words. And that these are the artificial wings of Mercury, by means of which the Argus eyes of philosophy have been cheated. (i, 26-7)

Tooke's re-evaluation of language also implies a re-evaluation of the nature of mind which allows him to challenge the rationalist claim that language and the mind exist in a structurally reflective relationship. Abbreviations add dispatch to communication by means of substitutions, elisions, and abstractions, operations analogous to those which philosophers and grammarians, misled by thinking language's only purpose was communication, attributed to the mind. Furthermore, if all words stand, either directly or indirectly, for simple ideas, the mind may be conceived as a passive receptor of simple
ideas and what the rationalists take to be its operations are no more than the operations of language. Tooke writes:

The business of the mind, as far as it concerns Language, appears to me to be very simple. It extends no farther than to receive Impressions, that is, to have Sensations or Feelings. What are called its operations, are merely the operations of Language. A consideration of Ideas, or of the Mind, or of Things (relative to the Parts of Speech) will lead us no farther than to Nouns: i.e. the signs of those impressions, or names of ideas. The other Part of Speech, the Verb, must be accounted for from the necessary use of it in communication. (i, 51)

It is this system of passive mind and active language, the key to the perfection of which is abbreviation, which Tooke offers as protection against the "imposition" of words. Like "metaphysical" error, such deception results from a basic misunderstanding of the nature and workings of language. This ignorance may lead us to use words without realizing that we do not know their correct meanings: any meaning such a word may seem to possess is merely, Tooke would have it, a diversionary effect which disguises its absence of "true" meaning. But such imposition, ungrounded in "true" meaning, can only be a consequence of a semantically purposeless accident which, nonetheless, has the power to divert attention from its own lack of meaning, creating an effect of truth.

By suggesting one may gain access to the "true" meanings of words by tracing the paths which lead from abbreviations, via the nouns or verbs to which they refer, to the simple ideas for which both abbreviation and noun or verb stand. Tooke's system seems to be an attempt to eliminate the hallucinatory effects of contingency from
language. On closer inspection, however, this strategy does not merely exclude the contingently-generated effects of meaning, but also any notion of meaning which provides language with the sort of positive character which would allow it to obtrude so absolutely on "true" meaning: regardless of whether we claim meaning to be fully present, or absent but perfectly hidden by a diversion, we are relying on a conception of language as something possessing a determinate identity. By implicitly prohibiting any such conception of language from its system, Tooke's text opens a space in which the workings of difference may be demonstrated, thus challenging the notion that the effects of contingency and linguistic "imposture" are somehow "other" than those of the processes productive of "true" meaning and suggesting, moreover, that "truth" and "meaning" are themselves effects of the suppression of difference.

Tooke's text never explicitly opens this space of difference and contingency for us: in fact, as we have noted, the Divisions seems committed to motivating language by excluding the disruptive effects of contingency and by grounding meaning in simple sense impressions. Nonetheless, as we have also seen, the theory of abbreviation, necessary for Tooke to posit the mind as the passive receptor of those impressions, raises the possibility that meaning is a product of difference: as Rajan has pointed out, Tooke's need to palliate the deferring effects of abbreviation betrays "a deep anxiety about the slipperiness of these words that refer only to other words, and that therefore make language a system of relational rather than positive terms" (21).
A comparable anxiety is apparent in the great lengths to which Tooke goes in order to stress the independence of his "system" from that which proves it: namely, etymology. He claims, for example, "my notions of language were formed before I could account etymologically for any one of the words in question" (i, 122). This strikes one as odd, for it would seem that the relationship between abbreviation and nouns or verbs which Tooke's system describes is necessarily historical and therefore etymological. A reason for the strict insulation of theory from proof is suggested, however, when B. raises the possibility that, in some of his proofs, H. may have "been misled by a fanciful etymology" (i, 128). H. replies:

If I have been misled, it most certainly is not by Etymology: of which I confess myself to have been shamefully ignorant at the time when these my notions of language were first formed. . . . [I]t was general reasoning a priori, that led me to the particular instances; not particular instances to the general reasoning. This Etymology, against whose fascination you would have me guard myself, did not occur to me till many years after my system was settled. (i, 130-1)

Etymology, it seems, has precisely the same almost magical capacity to confuse meaning and divert attention as do the words against whose imposition Tooke conceived his system as a shield. If, then, Tooke makes every effort to establish the separateness of his theory and its proof, it is because the evidence which proves his theory is based on the very sort of contingent signification against which his theory is apparently devised as a hedge. In other words, that which proves his system is the same as that which his system seeks to exclude.
Tooke's system, however, is based on another, related, exclusion. We have noted his criticism of the metaphors employed by other etymologists in their models of linguistic change. Tooke insists: "until they can get rid of these metaphors from their minds, they will not themselves be fit for etymology, nor furnish any etymology fit for reasonable men" (i, 260). This is not to suggest, however, that Tooke's own system is any less figurative than those of the etymologists he ridicules: it is indeed no more a rejection of figurality than his earlier refusal to identify with Bradshaw was a rejection of historicity. Here, as there and elsewhere, the text repeats the exclusionary gesture whereby a figure of identity and diversion -- in this case, metaphor -- is displaced by a figure which calls our attention to difference -- here, metonymy. "The inference of identity and totality" which we have said Paul de Man noted "is constitutive of metaphor" (AR 14) and which is apparent in the etymological models of which Tooke is critical, is displaced, in other words, by "the purely relational metonymic contact" (14) which characterizes Tooke's own model of linguistic change.

In this it should be noted that, because etymology is the site of the mutually supplementing relationship between language and history, the displacement of one etymological model by another -- in this case, the metaphoric by the metonymic -- necessarily involves a reconception of both history and language. Consequently, models of historical continuity and coherence such as those suggested by the genetic metaphors of the etymologists Tooke criticizes are coextensive with a positive conception of signification which excludes, or diverts attention from, the workings of linguistic
difference. By the same token, a metonymic model of linguistic change, constituted by relationships of contiguity rather than analogy, and chance rather than necessity (AR 14), coincides with an emphasis on linguistic difference and historical contingency.

Language and history converge in Tooke's system in the metonymic operations of abbreviation. Although abbreviations bear a relationship to the nouns or verbs they signify, that relationship is not one of identity: Tooke makes it clear that abbreviations are "merely substitutes" (i, 48) for nouns and verbs, the only words he deems really "necessary" (i, 48) to satisfy the main aim of language, communication. Furthermore, abbreviations are described as "artificial" appendages (i, 27), added to the presumably more substantial body of nouns and verbs as the wings of Mercury are tied to his heels (the frontispiece of Volume I shows a seated Mercury in the process of removing, or perhaps donning, these wings). Thus B., having grasped the essence of Tooke's argument, urges him to strip Mercury of his wings:

They seem easy enough to be taken off: for it strikes me now, after what you have said, that they are indeed put on in a peculiar manner, and do not, like those of other winged deities, make a part of his body. You have only to loose the strings from his feet, and take off his cap. Come -- Let us see what sort of figure he will make without them. (i, 27)

But what is the relationship between these artificial supplements and the "necessary" words for which they substitute? As Tooke's overwhelming emphasis on etymology makes clear, and despite his criticism of the organic metaphors of other etymologists, the relationship is a historical one characterized by "corruption." Despite this metaphor and its suggestion of a supra-historical identity tattered by time, Tooke's model of
abbreviation, as exemplified by his notion of abstraction, relies on a metonymic, and therefore contiguous, relation between an etymon and its "derivative." According to Tooke, such abstractions as fate, destiny, luck, heaven, hell, accident, just, right, wrong, or truth "are all merely Participles poetically embodied, and substantiated by those who use them" (ii, 19). They are the result of the reification of a quality or circumstance attributed to or associated with a particular phenomena: this quality or circumstance, he says, is the "cause" of its current abstract signification and, as such, is its meaning. The recuperation of an abstract word's "true" meaning therefore consists of the etymological determination of that circumstance or quality which has been reified in the abstract term. Tooke regards with contempt those mere "translations" which others disguise as etymologies, and claims "It is a trifling etymology that barely refers us to some word in another language, either the same or similar; unless the meaning of the word and cause of its imposition can be discovered by such reference" (ii, 397).

The process by which a quality or circumstance comes to serve as a substitute for a phenomenon with which it is associated is apparent in Tooke's explanation of the manner in which the Anglo-Saxons named the winds. He says: "Our winds are named by their distinguishing qualities. And, for that purpose, our ancestors (who, unlike their learned descendants, knew the meaning of words they employed in discourse) applied to them the past participles of four of their common words in their own language" (ii, 397-8). Thus east, for the uncorrupted linguistic understanding of the Anglo-Saxons, was "[aliquid] enraged, angry": our own word "east" comes from the past participle of the
Anglo-Saxon verb for "to grow angry" (ii, 398). Similarly, "west" comes from the past participle of the verb meaning "to wet," "north" from the past participle of the verb "to confine," and "south" from "to seethe" (ii, 398-9). The same holds true with our names for colours. Tooke says, "all colours in all languages must have their denomination from some common object, or from some circumstances which produce those colours" (ii, 166). "Yellow", for example, is the past participle of the Anglo-Saxon verb for "to set alight" (ii, 166).

In thus determining that abstractions signify circumstances or qualities not identical with, but merely attending the referent for which they actually substitute, Tooke describes a metonymic process of language change. Metonymy is further suggested in the fact that abstraction consists of the substitution of an effect (the abstract term) for a cause (the circumstance or quality associated with a phenomenon, which is the effaced "meaning" of the abstraction). As such, the relationship between etymon and "derivative" in Tooke's theory may be said to be one of contiguity and contingency rather than one of identity.

In employing a metonymic model of etymology, Tooke's text suggests a discontinuous scheme for both history and signification. Not only does the deferral of meaning from word to word in abbreviation frustrate the immediacy of signification, but the fact that signification must ultimately be cobbled together from a history of contingent relations rather than traced through a continuous, organic evolution, prohibits the possibility of transtemporal semantic identity or historical coherency and continuity.
Thus, as with the other "strangers" in Tooke's text, we find that contingency, which Tooke's system sought to exclude in order to establish "true" meaning, is in fact essential to the model of linguistic change necessary to validate that system.

As we might expect, Tooke's evidence is no less rhetorical than the metonymic system of linguistic change it seeks to prove. Although his etymological method gives the Diversions the appearance of empirical fact, one has only to scratch most such etymological "facts" to find out they are really figurative. Jean Paulhan pointed this out in 1953 in his work La Preuve par l'étymologie, where, as Derek Attridge explains:

having banished etymology from the realms of logic and science, he [Paulhan] welcomes it instead in a different realm (and one which perhaps subsumes those of logic and science): the realm of rhetoric, where it has a subtle and scintillating role to play. Its rhetorical partner, from which it's sometimes indistinguishable, is the calembour or paronomasia, the play on words. In both devices, the same process occurs: two similar-sounding but distinct signifiers are brought together, and the surface relationship between them invested with meaning through the inventiveness and rhetorical skill of the writer. If that meaning is in the form of a postulated connection between present and past, what we have is etymology; if it's in the form of a postulated connection within the present, the result is word-play. (193)

Etymologies, then, are puns in time. Puns, however, in suggesting a similarity of signification between two words on the basis of a similarity of their signifiers, would seem to represent exactly the sort of purposeless "imposition" which Tooke's system is ostensibly designed to exclude and protect against. Puns may indeed exert a "fascination" and diverting force like that H. feels he is being warned to guard himself against for, as Jonathan Culler has observed, puns pose the threat "that instead of permitting direct
contemplation of thought, linguistic signs might arrest the gaze and, by interposing their material form, affect or infect thought" (*On Deconstruction* 91). Furthermore, puns create such diverting effects because "an 'accidental' or external relationship between signifiers is treated as a conceptual relationship" (91). This seems to be the case with Tooke's etymologies. But, because they are etymologies, the *Diversion* treats morphologically similar signifiers as not merely conceptually related, but also as signs of a perhaps corrupted but nonetheless recoverable and coherent conceptual identity extending through time. This idea is coextensive with a conception of history as a continuous unity of self-present moments, untraced by past or future, and thus static: in other words, "not history."

Tooke's system derives its truth value and his proofs establish their simulation of fact from an imposition similar to that which the same system and proofs seek to eliminate: that of the "truth which conceals that there is none" (Baudrillard 1). While Tooke fears that "the imposition of words" may create an effect of meaning where there is only an absence of such, his attempt to motivate language through etymology offers proof of nothing but his own skill as an artful manipulator of the coincidental or, at best, unprovable relations between signifiers separated by time. Furthermore, Tooke's system, despite his fervent protests to the contrary, relies on these etymologies for its own claims to truth. These claims, however, and the truths they "prove," are effects, as we've seen, of rhetorical devices such as pun and metonymy. The possibility that truth and fact may be constituted rhetorically, draws attention to the absence of either, except as effects of
rhetoric. Indeed, in Tooke's work, it is this absence of truth as a determinate presence which permits the effects of rhetoric to offer the diversion of "truth" his system requires if it is to oppose the confusion and imposition of words of which he seems to be so wary. In short, truth and fact are diversions created by the denial of the rhetorical nature of rhetorical effects, the possibility of which is the absence of truth conceived as presence. Tooke draws on the impositional force of this diversionary logic in order to eliminate precisely the absence of meaning and of truth which is its possibility.

As we have seen, however, absence continues to exert its pressure throughout the work. It's "there," for example, in the diversions of history and language which suggest that neither possess a determinate character, but rather both are constituted by virtue of their supplementary relationship with each other. This absence leaves history and language silent: neither is able to speak for itself, or to offer any explanation of its workings.

Tooke's text suggests, however, that this silence is a locus of power. The conservative intellectual elite, for example, against whom Olivia Smith says Tooke directs his argument, controlled this space in the late eighteenth-century, and from it spoke on behalf of language and history. Moreover, as Smith shows, this elite also spoke on behalf of their own interests, and characterized language with the intent of ensuring the hegemony of their class. It was a strategy whose effects were consolidated by the corroboration of linguistic by "metaphysical" error, even as Tooke describes. Because language can not speak for itself, the deployment of such error diverted attention from
the absence of truth which the simulation of truth concealed. Although philosopher and
commonalty alike were the dupes of its effects, only the former profited by them.

Our attention may be diverted from absence by the "truth effects" which issue
from it, all of which seek to deny that absence. But because of the absence of a ground
for these truths, that space is also a site of contention and resistance: whatever truth
value any claims issued from this space may possess arises solely from the fact that such
claims efface the absence which is their possibility. By the same token, however, such
claims are necessarily free-floating and thus subject to challenge and transformation: they
can do nothing more than create the effect of a coherent truth and thus conceal the
absence of truth.

Tooke's text resists the diversions of such "truth effects" by mimicking the process
which creates them. For example, in denying history and language any self-identical
character, the *Diversions* simulates the absence which such positive conceptions conceal.
But while this space provides an opportunity to glimpse the supplementary relationship
of language and history, it also allows Tooke to posit a "truth" which may displace that
of the dominant discourse. To have any political efficacy, such a truth must appear to
have been "discovered," rather than fabricated, and, indeed, this is the claim Tooke
makes for his system. For example, while declaring the independence of his system from
his proofs, he states that etymology offered him a means "either of disabusing myself
from error (which I greatly feared); or of obtaining a confirmation sufficiently strong to
encourage me to believe (what every man knowing any thing of human nature will always
be very backward in believing of himself) that I had really made a discovery" (i, 132). And yet, as we have seen, his "discovery" is quite literally "made": its truths are not the products of empirical investigation, but rather the effects of rhetorical ingenuity. In this way, Tooke's method simulates the process of simulation constitutive of "truth." In so doing, it draws attention to the diversions such "truths" necessarily create in order to conceal the absence of truth.

For Tooke, our flawed understanding of language, and thus of our own meanings when we speak, is the result of a tradition of error imposed by an intellectual elite; this fact implies that there is a danger, perhaps even an inevitable danger, that truth may be prescriptively imposed rather than descriptively discovered. While this seems to be another source of anxiety for Tooke, leading him to ground meaning in simple sense impressions, it also offers the possibility, of which he takes advantage, that one may alter an object of knowledge such as language, merely by talking about it. One way in which language may be so modified is by making certain claims for its history. Derek Attridge, for example, describes the phenomenon of "folk etymology," in which the meanings of two words (he gives the example of the words "rage" and "outrage") "have in fact been modified by the false (and unconscious) etymological theorising of native speakers, who assume connections between signifiers on the ground of their similarity in sound" (196). This seems a fair approximation of Tooke's strategy: drawing on language's resources of contingency and arbitrariness, he creates effects of historical truth and meaning with which he may then disrupt the synchronic order, and with it presumably the power of the
intellectual and political elite which controls it. Attridge calls this phenomenon "feedback," which he describes as: "a short-circuit, whereby history is reinscribed in the present -- not as a series of 'real events' (which having passed, can no longer intrude) but as the only way in which history can intervene in the present, as a theory or story of the past" (198). Tooke, in other words, disrupts synchronic meaning with a theory or representation of diachronic meaning. This representation of meaning, however, does more than merely supplant one determinate signification with another; rather, in simulating the processes by which "truths" are established, it draws attention to the diversions which conceal the relativity of all such truths and the absence which inhabits them. This is nowhere more apparent than in Tooke's derivation of "truth" from the past participle of the Anglo-Saxon verb "to think, to believe firmly, to be thoroughly persuaded of, To Trow" (ii, 402). He says:

TRUE, as we now write it; or TREW, as it was formerly written; means simply and merely -- That which is TROWED. And, instead of its being a rare commodity upon earth; except only in words, there is nothing but TRUTH in the world.

That every man, in his communication with others, should speak that which he TROWETH, is of so great importance to mankind; that it ought not to surprize us, if we find the most extravagant and exaggerated praises bestowed upon TRUTH. But TRUTH supposes mankind: for whom and by whom alone the word is formed, and to whom only it is applicable. If no man, no TRUTH. There is therefore no such thing as eternal, immutable, everlasting TRUTH; unless mankind, such as they are at present, be also eternal, immutable, and everlasting (ii, 403-4).
AFTERWORD

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to demonstrate that linguistic historiography as it is currently practiced is conducted in the service of an impoverished notion of language. Derived, as we have seen, from the historiography of science, linguistic historiography conceives the object proper to its study in a way that reduces language to the status of one more "objective fact" of our world. It is strange, but the coherence of these histories depends on language possessing the very empirical stability which the texts which comprise those histories are often, as we have seen, at great pains to substantiate. But what would a history of language study be if "language" were something other than a determinate phenomenon?

As I have sought to demonstrate in my readings, such a history would consist, at least in part, of an analysis of the relationships and ideological conflicts gathered together and obscured by the proper name of "language." Such a history would ask not what language is, but rather, how language functions in a given context. Such a question would, perhaps lead to new questions, necessitate new categories to understand language. "Discourse," is perhaps a good example of one such category. Indeed, language seems ultimately to stand in the works at which I looked here as a sign for an unnameable,
prephenomenal abyss which must be effaced in order for any determinate phenomena, in
order for any meaning, to emerge.

As such, "language" is a site traversed by all concepts we might wish to consider. The
interrogation of such a space has an obviously disintegrating effect on the sort of coherent
history which Aarsleff privileges: no longer does language stand still long enough for
successive generations to describe its workings. Rather, "language," as a concept, is bound
to the moment, its identity shifting always in response to those, like such as Johnson who
would speak for it, or others, such as Horne Tooke, who would simulate the process by
which language is made to speak for the interests of certain powerful groups.

Because of its imbrication with other concepts such as history and community,
language is, in a sense, everywhere and nowhere: although its effects are everywhere in
evidence, the actual borders of language are difficult to pin down. This explains in part
the different emphasis which is apparent in each of my chapters. Each of my chapters
attracts its own emphasis. While each may illustrate the problem of the relationship of
language and history from its own particular angle, however, none could be said to
contribute to the sort of consistent image of an age which Aarsleff seeks in his own
historiographical practice. At the same time, however, the coherence of such histories,
like the coherence of all texts, is necessarily based on patterns of elision and diversions
all of which are invariably bound up in the ideological construction of meaning. In
asking not what language *is* but rather, how language functions, and how it is that we can talk about language, it seems we are addressing a necessary counterpart of the sort of history currently being written by Aarsleff and other linguistic historiographers.
NOTES

Introduction. Towards a Non-Phenomenal History of Language Study

1. For a concise description of these categories and a list of several works which fall into each, see Vivien Law, "Language and its Students: The History of Linguistics."


3. Jonathan Culler describes the "the phenomenality of language" as "the assumption that linguistic structures are given as perceivable and intelligible" ("Reading Lyric" 105). The notion that "there is given to perception a body of sensible signifiers which stand in a representational relation to conceptual signifieds that are given to the understanding," he says, "is crucial to the notion of reliable cognition" (104). I take the phrase "non-
phenomenal linguistics" from de Man's essay "The Resistance to Theory." In that essay, he notes that, because "mimesis" or representation is only one aspect of linguistic functioning, language will always be inadequate as a figure for understanding, despite its traditional "authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition." "It is not a priori certain," de Man continues, "that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world" (RT 11).

4. It is impossible to achieve an Archimedean perspective on language from within language and this impossibility is constitutive for Heidegger of being human:

In order to be who we are, we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else. Thus we always see the nature of language only to the extent to which language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself. That we cannot know language -- know it according to the traditional concept of knowledge defined in terms of cognition as representation -- is not a defect, however, but rather an advantage by which we are favoured with a special realm, that realm where we, who are needed and used to speak language, dwell as mortals. (On The Way 134)

5. In Being and Time, Heidegger refers to the sign ["Riss"] not in the phenomenal form of "lines on a surface" [Riss in her Wand] but as a "rift" [der Riss] which "structures and prevails throughout the open, unlocked freedom of language" (121, qtd. in Burns 118).

6. References to quotations from works by Jacques Derrida will be cited using the following abbreviations: SP: 'Speech and Phenomena' and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs; D: Dissemination; FL: "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority;'" OG: Of Grammatology; OS: Of Spirit; SEC: "Signature Event Context."
7. Derrida discusses the trace in *Speech and Phenomena* as a primordial movement of reference and differentiation whose effacement is the condition of possibility of effects of presence. As such

The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace. . . . (*SP* 142)

8. In a similar spirit, Derrida, discussing the necessary accession to language which precedes any utterance or what he calls the "fore-coming [prévenante] address [Zuspruch] of language," writes "Language must already be speaking for us — it must, so to speak, be already spoken and addressed to us" (*OS* 129 n.5). Cf. Agamben, p. 87.

9. My remarks here concerning the "figure of fact" are derived from "Language, History, and the 'Romance of Fact,'" David L. Clark’s introduction to a special issue of *Recherches Sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*. Clark himself takes the phrase "the romance of fact" from Tilottoma Rajan’s "The Erasure of Narrative in Post-Structuralist Representations of Wordsworth."

10. We will examine Aarsleff's work in greater detail in Chapter One.

11. Societies and organizations dedicated to the history of language study include: the International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences, the Société d'Histoire et d'Épistémologie des Sciences du Langage, both established in 1978. Since 1979, the latter has published the journal *Histoire, Épistémologie, Langage*; in Britain there is the
Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas (since 1984) and, since 1987, the North American Association for the History of the Language Sciences. Since 1974, the periodical *Historiographia linguistica*, founded and edited by the University of Ottawa's Konrad Koerner, has been the flagship journal for the field. For brief summaries of the linguistic historiography see R.H. Robins, "Preface to third edition." *A Short History of Linguistics*; Giulio Lepschy, "Introduction." *History of Linguistics*; and Julie Tetel Andresen, "Why do we do linguistic historiography?" p. 370, nn. 1,2; as well as pages 11 to 14 in the introductory essay to her book *Linguistics in America, 1769-1924*.

12. Although it is a position of which he is critical, Murray Cohen makes a similar observation in his remarkable book *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England 1640-1785*. Cohen notes that "most intellectual historians think that the choice of an idea is obvious and that the explanation of that idea proves their worth" (xi).

13. Hans Aarsleff argues a similar point in *The Study of Language in England 1780-1860*, noting

The task of gaining the proper depth of historical perspective within a given period can only be satisfied by seeking to recapture all relevant contemporary knowledge without reference to or misguidance by the later accumulation of scholarly opinion and assignment of influences, which are far too often and too easily accorded the status of unquestioned doctrine. (10)

14. The same comparative approach informs Joseph Priestley's various lectures on language which are the subject of Chapter Six of this dissertation.
15. Andresen makes a similar point in *Linguistics in America 1769-1924*:

Since linguistic historiographers are identifying and investigating those texts and practices from the past that fall under some category we are presently calling 'language study,' it follows that linguistic historiographers approach the history of linguistics with some personal vision (call it a theory) of what language study is. In challenging previous assumptions about the history of linguistics, linguistic historiographers aim at an enriched vision of what language and language study must be by enhancing the sources of our present study. (17)


17. A similar indifference towards theory, no less curious, is apparent in the works of those examining literature from a primarily philosophical perspective. Gary Wihl examines this phenomena and some of its alternatives in *The Contingency of Theory: Pragmatism, Expressivism and Deconstruction*.

18. In Locke’s *Essay*, for example, language fails because of the capricious manner in which words and ideas are linked in the minds of speakers. And yet, as I shall suggest in Chapter Three, there is an aspect of this linking which exceeds and evades explanation in terms of the categories of subject, intention, and meaning.

19. The pertinence of this distinction to the context of Andresen’s phrase "to think linguistically" was suggested by the opening pages of the "Prefatory Postscript" to Warminski’s *Readings in Interpretation*. See p. xxvii.
20. Gasché notes that Derrida employs "syntax" in the same radically expanded manner as he does "writing" in its relation to speech:

Derrida's use of the concept of syntax . . . is not simply a reference to the formal properties of language insofar as these are traditionally considered to refer to the articulation of the signifieds. Indeed form is just another name for presence, Derrida notes. His use of syntax does not imply the traditional subjection of syntax to semantics. In distinction from the grammatical opposition of the syntactic and the semantic, of form and content, and so on, Derrida's use of syntax is intended to undo these oppositions systematically. Syntax is conceived by Derrida as being irreducibly in excess of the semantic, and consequently as disequilibrating that traditional grammatical and philosophical distinction. (*Tain* 242-3)

In its asymmetrical relation with meaning, Derridean syntax, bears a certain homology to de Man's imbricated notions of inscription and the materiality of language.

21. See, for example, Julie Tetel Andresen, "From Condillac to Condorcet: The Algebra of History."


Chapter One. The History of What Language is Not: Linguistic Historiography and Non-Phenomenal Linguistics

1. Aarsleff, for example, cites a letter from Locke to Molyneux dated Dec. 26, 1692 in which he states, "I find none so fit, nor so fair judges, as those whose minds the study of mathematics has opened and dis-entangled from the cheat of words" (*LS* 70 n. 2).
References to quotations from works by Aarsleff will be cited using the following abbreviations: *Study*: *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*; *LS*: *From Locke to Saussure*.

2. Aarsleff’s scholarship is nowhere more penetrating than in his analysis of the various institutional influences which have shaped, fostered, and restrained various ideas concerning language since the Renaissance.

3. Aarsleff’s own work, as we shall see, is continuous in ways which his text does not explicitly acknowledge with the "main tradition" of linguistic thought which it describes. In this regard, his historiographical project could be said to be no less "retroactive" (to use a word which Derek Attridge employs in his description of Aarsleff’s work [210 n. 44]) than those against which he mounts his challenge.

4. The Adamic doctrine was most rife in works in the mystical and cabbalistic tradition such as those of Jacob Boehme and Robert Fludd. It also, however, exerted some pressure on less esoteric texts. Aarsleff detects the Adamic strain in John Webster’s *Academiarum Examen* (1654) and notes that Robert South, a former school-mate of Locke, in a sermon preached in St. Paul’s in 1662, claimed that Adam "came into the world a philosopher, which sufficiently appeared by his writing the nature of things upon their names" (qtd. in *LS* 59). Aarsleff also finds traces of the Adamic theory in the work of Leibniz for whom, he says, "language in the process of time shows a descent from wisdom to a low point that occurred before the 'discover' of this relationship between
language and creation, a discovery that in Germany had coincided with the Reformation" (59).

5. As Aarsleff explains, the story of the Lockean tradition's development is hardly that of uncontested progress over time. Its history is marked by diversions and conflicts, one of which Aarsleff describes in *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*. During the period of Aarsleff's study, Lockean linguistic thought, distilled and modified through the *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (*Essay on the Origin of Human Understanding*) by the philosopher Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac, and exerting its influence in Tooke's *Diversions of Purley*, was on a collision course with the "new philology" then emerging from the Continent. Historical and comparative, the mode of study of the new philology was agreeable to the temper of an early nineteenth-century audience hungry for the objectivity of science and anxious to refute the "delusion and error" (*LS* 32) of eighteenth-century thought in general. "Factual, descriptive, classificatory, empirical, and comparative, the new philology appeared to satisfy every article of scientific -- or rather academic -- faith in objectivity and disengagement from ideology" (32), writes Aarsleff. The loser in this shift, however, was the Lockean tradition, the decisive turn coming with the Philological Society of London's adoption of the methods of the new philology in its plans for the dictionary which would eventually be known as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*Study 4*). The curious thing in all of this, Aarsleff points out, was the fact that the new philology was not quite as new as it
seemed. Not only did it not (as German scholars insist) spring *ex nihilo* from the pen of Friedrich Schlegel, it actually echoed a previous philological tradition, whose concern with "the early vernacular and ... the philosophical exploration of the nature and function of language and words" (*Study 5*) had been driven from prominence by the eighteenth-century preoccupation with universal grammar and the origin of language.

More curious still, however, is Aarsleff's observation that the return to philology was accompanied by a return to the essentialist and innatist principles of the Adamic doctrine (*LS 32*). The new philology's scientism, Aarsleff says, was modelled on the work in comparative anatomy by George Cuvier, whose insistence on the fixity of species (34) over time, "reintroduced essentialism along with final causes, the very idea that Mersenne and Locke had dismissed as incompatible with the aims and method of the study of nature" (34). The impact of these ideas on language study is apparent, for example, in the work of William Whewell who, in his *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* (1840), wrote "We take for granted that each kind of thing has a special character which may be expressed by a Definition" (qtd. in *LS 35*). Under Whewell's mastership, Trinity College became what Aarsleff calls "the home of the linguistic turn against Locke and Condillac" (35). The resurgence of the Adamic doctrine of which this aphorism is indicative, was perhaps most apparent in the writings of the nineteenth-century figure whom Aarsleff calls the "European linguistic sage." Citing the research of John Holloway, Aarsleff notes that Coleridge, Carlyle, Emerson, and others wrote in a style which
replaced ratiocinative discourse with the evocation of the true meanings of words, pointing to the meanings they hold deeper than their common significations, on the premise, of course, that this deeper meaning is somehow naturally available to all thoughtful readers. (37)

Also in this group we will find Richard Chenevix Trench who claimed that God had set "such a seal of truth upon language, that men are continually uttering deeper things than they know" (qtd. in Study x).

Aarsleff notes that, when the proto-fascist founder of the Ultramontanist movement, French philosopher Joseph de Maistre wrote "contempt for Locke is the beginning of wisdom -- le commencement de la sagesse" (qtd. in Study, xi), he expressed a view that was current not only in nineteenth-century France, but also in England and New England. Locke was condemned in the nineteenth century for much the same reason as he had been in his own day: for denying that Adam had enjoyed the use of a language in which there was a motivated relationship between words and things. For Aarsleff, "the close linkage of themes two hundred years apart suggests the persistence of linguistic thought" (Study xi), that is, the almost typological recurrence of certain linguistic notions (such as that of the Adamic doctrine in the nineteenth-century) years after their vogue has apparently passed.

Despite the authority which linguistic histories have accorded it, however, the academic philological tradition remains for Aarsleff "a closed period, . . . an aberration" (LS 32) which, its significant contributions to knowledge notwithstanding, has obscured
what for him is the "main tradition" (19) in the history of language study over the past three hundred years.

6. R.H. Robins offers a similar definition of the object of linguistic study in *A Short History of Linguistics*:

In order not to impose the standards of linguistics today on the decision on what to admit as linguistic work from the past, we may agree to understand as part of the history of linguistics any systematic study directed towards some aspect or aspects of language envisaged as an interesting and worthy object of such study in its own right. (4)

7. In evoking the figure of language "crossing a threshold" as I do in this passage, I do not intend to assert either the self-identity of language or the determinateness of historical processes. Throughout this thesis I am compelled, as are all who engage in metalinguistic discourse, to employ narratological figures to describe what, I maintain, is, in fact, the play of narratological disruption and recuperation constitutive of all notions of language or history as coherent, determinate phenomena.

8. I derive this formulation from the following passage in de Man's essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity":

It is generally admitted that a positivistic history of literature, treating it as if it were a collection of empirical data, can only be a history of what literature is not. At best, it would be a preliminary classification opening the way for actual literary study, and at worst, an obstacle in the way of literary understanding. On the other hand, the intrinsic interpretation of literature claims to be anti- or a-historical, but often presupposes a notion of history of which the critic is not himself aware. (162-3)
It is a cardinal principle of this thesis that de Man’s observation is no less applicable to linguistic historiography than it is to literature.

9. In *From Locke to Saussure*, for example, Aarsleff refers favourably to the work of the historians of science Paul Oskar Kristeler and Alexander Koyré and recalls how, when writing the *Study*, his "own thoughts were developing along parallel lines with those that were being traced in the history of science, revealed with éclat in Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*" (8). Since the *Study*, he says he has "kept in touch with both the history of science and the sociology of science" (8) and points out that two of the essays in *From Locke to Saussure* were first published in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* along with seven other of his essays. "Science and language have always kept close relations" (8), he maintains. Although this statement may be accurate if we look at figures such as Bacon, Wilkins, Sprat, and others, one cannot help but wonder whether the alliance between science and language is not just one more phase in the history of linguistic thought, one more fruitful "error" in a history which seems ultimately to have no all-encompassing theme but that of error. Aarsleff’s historiographical method is, moreover, infused with the empirical spirit of Bacon and Locke. In this regard, the coherence of his history seems a function of the fact that those texts which comprise its subject matter are also its methodological fountainhead.

10. The question of the proper approach to the study of language is a vexed one with a long history. The dichotomy of opinion which emerges, however, breaks down
according to whether emphasis is to be placed on theory or practice. Robins traces the controversy to differences between the philosophical orientation of the Stoic school's philosophical treatment of language in the third century B.C. and the observational method of the widely-studied *Technē grammatike* ("Art of Grammar") of the Alexandrian Dionysis Thrax (c. 100 B.C.). Widely read and commented upon, Thrax's systematic description of Greek grammar remained a standard work as late as thirteen hundred years after its composition. With its empirical approach to language study, it offered an alternative to the concerns of the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle, formalizing a dispute which, Robins writes, remains very active still today, between (a) those who see linguistics as essentially the accurate recording and the meticulous analysis of languages as they are revealed in the speech and writing of native speakers and (b) those who look more deeply for a theory of language able to explain and to justify the very existence of grammars, and to account for the capacity of human beings for the acquisition and use of their native language, and to reveal in part the nature and the working of the human mind or brain. (36-7)

11. By the same token, however, Crowley adds, "it is true that the science of linguistics has particular problems with its object and it would not be too much to claim that it is the principal aim of the *Course* to resolve such problems" (28).

12. For reading as a confrontation with the conditions which make decision possible, see Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation*.

13. Such criticism arises with particular urgency in feminist theory. Although critical of cultural feminists such as Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich for what is often viewed as
their self-defeating essentialism, feminists are no less wary of what is frequently seen as the category-dissolving mire of poststructuralist nominalism. An interesting article in this regard is Linda Alcoff's "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory." Although Alcoff endorses the poststructuralist emphasis on "social explanations of individual practices and experiences" (306), she rejects what she calls its totalizing and "neodeterministic" denial of "the subject's ability to reflect on the social discourse and challenge its determinations" (307). Poststructuralism, she writes, leads to a nominalist conception of "woman" as a fictional, arbitrary category -- a mere name. As objects of such a discourse, women have little hope of resisting its coercive power to position them unless they reject all efforts to conceptualize them and practice a "wholly negative feminism" (308) which, in Alcoff's view, paradoxically "eliminates all possibility for the defeat of logocentrism and its oppressive power" (307). In fact, Alcoff argues, the nominalism of poststructuralism is such that it could "wipe out feminism itself" (309). This seems a strange assertion, however, given the fact that feminism is itself a category whose central concept, woman, Alcoff has already stated "is impossible to formulate precisely" (295), that is, in any but a provisional way. From a poststructuralist perspective then, "feminism" could be said to be always already "wiped out," or under erasure -- crossed out so as to signify, at once, both its highly provisional status but also its practical necessity as a concept. Ultimately Alcoff is unwilling to trade the political efficacy of the concept against a future which, from the perspective of deconstruction, Derrida writes, "breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only
be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity" *(OG 5)*. Alcoff's own concept of "positionality" suggests a stable category crossed with provisional and dynamic conceptions of "woman" which then serves as a non-essential point of departure for immediate political action. Alcoff thus shows a desire to motivate (in the linguistic sense) the concepts of feminism and woman and with them their agents of political action without fixing the names to a static, determinate signifier.

14. Saussure's anagrammatic research is described in Jean Starobinski's *Les mots sous les mots* (1971), published in English as *Words upon Words: the Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*.

15. Good discussions of the trace are to be found in Derrida's essay "Différence" as well as in "Semiology and Grammatology," an interview between Derrida and Julia Kristeva (pp. 15-36 in *Positions*). There Derrida remarks:

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element" -- phoneme or grapheme -- being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (26)

16. Silence is not the only figure which marks (or, more precisely, which reveals in concealing) the materiality of language. In Johnson's *Dictionary*, for example, we find
the same space marked by figures of sickness and death, appropriate as we shall see in Chapter Four because of the relationship between death and the material dimension of language.

17. In de Man's work, literature is a form of language use distinguished from others by the degree to which it "is not blind" to its own "rhetoricity" (RB 136), that is, what Culler nicely summarizes as the "gap between sign and meaning, between meaning and intent, between performative and constative or cognitive functions of language, and between rhetoric as persuasion and rhetoric as trope" ("Resisting Theory" 1578). In "The Rhetoric of Blindness," de Man explains that, in its fullest sense, the term "literary," applies to "any text that implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature; that is, of its 'rhetoricity'" (136). For this reason, those gaps and tensions elided and effaced in more discursive forms of writing, are foregrounded and exposed in the literary text. The designation "literary," however, is not restricted to works of literature. In an important footnote, de Man notes, "The criterion of literary specificity does not depend on the greater or lesser discursiveness of the mode but on the degree of consistent 'rhetoricity' of the language" (RB 136-7 n.48). Unrestricted to literature, "rhetoricity" and "literariness" are synecdochic references to language's inorganic, material dimension. In "Literary History and Literary Modernity," de Man describes the difference characteristic of literature as a privileged sort of self-knowledge. Literature, he writes,
is "a form of language that knows itself to be mere repetition, mere fiction and allegory, forever unable to participate in the spontaneity of action or modernity" (161).

18. De Man notes that "Modern" can be used in opposition to "traditional" (LHLM 144).

19. The remarks which follow this passage are applicable not only to literary history but also to the history of linguistic study as it has been written to date. De Man comments:

"A positivistic history that sees literature only as what it is not (as an objective fact, an empirical psyche, or a communication that transcends the literary text as text) is, therefore, necessarily inadequate" (164). Similarly, a linguistic historiography which regards language as that which it is not (i.e. as an "objective fact," etc.) as well as its study (i.e. the study of that which language "is not," ) raises a host of theoretical problems which we will explore in these pages.

20. I take the phrase "nothing to do with temporality" from the transcription of the tape of "Kant and Schiller," the fifth Messenger lecture which de Man delivered at Cornell University on March 3, 1983. De Man makes a similar point concerning the a-temporality of the animating structures of history, and their relationship to language, in "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" the sixth lecture in the Messenger series. De Man says:

[T]his errancy of language which never reaches the mark, which is always displaced in relation to what it meant to reach, it is this errancy of language, this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife, the Benjamin calls history. As such, history is not human, because it pertains strictly to the order of language; it is not natural, for the same reason; it is not phenomenal, in the sense that no cognition, no knowledge about man, can
be derived from a history which as such is purely a linguistic complication; and it is not really temporal either, because the structure that animates it is not a temporal structure. Those disjunctions in language do get expressed by temporal metaphors, but they are only metaphors (92).

21. This errant surplus, moreover, betrays the integrity of every text, not merely those "traditional" accounts which, in their uncritical disregard of the rhetorical dimension of either their own discourse or that of the texts they study and seek to represent, we might consider "re recuperative": to the extent that all texts -- even those which deny meaning, value, and truth -- are "ensembles of meaning effects" (Redfield 59), all are characterized by their effacement of the blankness of the materiality of the letter through a process of figuration. Even nihilism, for which deconstruction is frequently taken and in whose name it is often condemned, is merely recuperation at a distance. Nihilism cannot control the operations which are the condition of possibility of its own denials: its negative knowledge has no privileged claim to the materiality of the processes by which its denials are made possible.

22. Like Levinas' "trace," history "is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past" ("The Trace of the Other," 358) or, in de Man’s terms, "pure anteriority" (Temporality 207).

23. This is in no way to deny "history." It is rather to acknowledge that historical knowledge is always mediated by figures. To read these figures as "fact" is to efface the aperture in all concepts through which ideology performs its naturalizing work.
Chapter Two. "Something, he knew not what": John Locke and the Fiction of History

1. As Aarsleff notes, the social aspect of language which Locke declares in III, I, i is implied throughout the Essay. Aarsleff comments "Locke and Condillac certainly held that language is a social institution, but they never used the term" (LS 20). In commentary on the Essay, however, this aspect of Locke's linguistics tends to be overshadowed by an emphasis on the relation of language to thought. For a reading which seeks to redress this imbalance by describing the importance Locke assigns to "the public provenance of meaning" (414) and the prominent place he accords civil conversation in his linguistic theory, see Peter Walmsley's "Prince Maurice's Rational Parrot: Civil Discourse in Locke's Essay."

2. Harris and Taylor remark that this passage was "one of those most frequently quoted from Book III in the 18th century" (118). In its suggestion that "the historical expansion of a vocabulary, from a core of names for simple ideas of sensation, goes hand in hand with the expansion of the mind's store of ideas" this passage, they say, formed the basis for the Romantic notion that the language of a community of speakers reflected their intellectual character (118-9).

3. The influence of language upon a people's "manners" is not automatic, however. To his formulation of the reciprocally-conditioning relationship between language and social
identity, Condillac adds the stipulation that language will only shape "manners" once "its rules" have been "ascertained by celebrated writers" (299, §162).

4. The relation between this differential dimension of concepts and Locke's notion of the association of ideas is suggested by a passage from Hugh Blair's *Edinburgh Lecture on Language* (1785). Blair says:

> Every object which makes any impression of the human mind, is constantly accompanied with certain circumstances and relations that strike us at the same time. It never presents itself to our view, *isolé*, as the French express it; that is, independent on, and separated from, every other thing; but always occurs as somehow related to other objects; going before them, or following them, their effect or their cause; resembling them, or opposed to them; distinguished by certain qualities, or surrounded with certain circumstances. By this means every idea or object carries in its train other ideas. (I. p. 354)

5. As de Man notes, "the sequential, diachronic structure of the process stems from the nature of literary language as an entity, not as an event" (*LHLM* 163).

6. As Aarsleff points out, Locke's rejection of innate ideas did not entail a repudiation of innate "faculties." Aarsleff remarks

> Neither Locke nor Condillac ever assumed that reason and its manifestation in reflection were not innate; in line with the new science and Newton, they were not interested in the why but in the how. As Locke said, "Man is by nature [i.e. innately] rational", and "God commands what reason does"... To Locke, everything that man could ever know, he owed to the light of nature, by which he meant the two inalienable, powerful, innate creative faculties of sense-experience and reason. (*LS* 108)
7. Aristotle's view of language had lead him to a similar conclusion. In *De Interpretatione* I, for example, he says that, despite the diversity of languages, "the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects of which those affections are representations, or likenesses, images, copies" (qtd. in Harris and Taylor 21).

8. The overlap between empiricism and rationalism in Locke's work has been well established. Aarsleff, for example, argues that Locke was a rationalist like Descartes, but was made into an empiricist by his later readers. The opposition between empiricism and rationalism, Aarsleff maintains, is a nineteenth-century invention, advanced in the context of a conservative reaction against contemporary philosophical doctrines, in the interest of a characteristic Victorian ideology. Further, this view did not remain unopposed during the nineteenth century; Coleridge, who was no mean judge, said that Locke and Descartes held "precisely the same opinions about the original sources of our ideas." (283-4)

9. Locke's hesitant gestures in the direction of a fully diacritical representation of language become apparent when placed alongside the thought of Saussure. For Saussure, the arbitrariness of the sign and its differential character are thoroughly caught up in each other. Locke's arbitrary sign, however, (and impossibly) retains the self-identity and autonomy which the sign exhibits in the Adamic doctrine from which Locke seeks to distinguish his own theory of language. In this chapter, I attempt to describe some of the tensions which arise as a result of Locke's Janus-faced vision of the sign.
10. In his "Preface" to the Dictionary, Johnson describes his own confrontation with a similar limit in particularly vivid terms. Recalling his original desire to "leave neither words nor things unexamined" (par. 72), he writes that "to pursue perfection, was, like the first inhabitants of Arcadia, to chase the sun, which, when they had reached the hill where he seemed to rest, was still beheld at the same distance from them" (par. 72). Like Locke, Johnson represents his confrontation with the limit by way of the figure of a non-English "other."

11. In explaining his suddenly-recognized need to include language in his discussion of understanding, Locke makes it clear that the relation between the two is a negative one. Understanding and words are related, he says, because knowledge, "being conversant about Truth, had constantly to do with Propositions." But although it may be necessary to knowledge, Locke describes the work of language as almost unequivocally corrupting and obfuscating. Words, he declares,

interpose themselves so much between our Understandings and the Truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the Medium through which visible Objects pass, their Obscurity and Disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our Eyes, and impose upon our Understandings. (III, ix, 21)

12. As E.J. Lowe explains:

The scholastic approach (though this is mildly to caricature it) was to suppose that the explanation of why a thing behaves as it does -- why a stone falls or why (to use Molières facetious example) opium sends one to sleep -- is to be found in an account of the thing's "essence", or "nature", or "substantial form". But this only seems to tell us that a thing behaves in the way it does because it is a thing of a kind such that it behaves in
that way -- that opium sends us to sleep because it is the kind of stuff that makes us sleepy (it has a "dormitive virtue"). This is neither very enlightening nor very useful in enabling us to predict the behaviour of things not already familiar to us. (70-1)

And yet, in maintaining that the nominal essence of something (i.e. all we can know about it) is that by which something is said to be known, Locke reiterates a similar logic. The main difference between the two approaches is Locke’s rooting of nominal essences in the stable ground of real essences.

13. In his apocalyptic theory of language Priestley will predict such perfectly realized knowledge as the culmination of history. See Chapter Six.

14. Here it is important to note the distinction between quality and idea, something about which Locke admits he is often less scrupulous than is necessary. He differentiates the two in the following passage:

Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call Idea; and the Power to produce any Idea in our mind, I call Quality of the Subject wherein that power is. Thus a Snow-ball having the power to produce in us the Ideas of White, Cold, and Round, the Powers to produce those Ideas in us, as they are in the Snow-ball, I call Qualities; and as they are Sensations, or Perceptions, in our Understandings, I call them Ideas; which Ideas, if I speak of sometimes, as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those Qualities in the Objects which produce them in us. (II, viii, 8)

15. What I here call the "telegraphic" model of understanding is the epistemological counterpart of Locke’s telementational model of linguistic communication. For more on this, see Chapter Two of Talbot J. Taylor, Mutual Misunderstanding: Scepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation.
16. The notion of the "fittedness" of mind to the qualities of things is crucial to Locke's theory of knowledge. In Book Two, he writes:

Thus the first Capacity of Humane Intellect, is, That the mind is fitted to receive the Impressions made on it; either, through the Senses, by outward Objects; or by its own Operations, when it reflects on them. This is the first step a man makes towards the Discovery of any thing, and the Groundwork whereon to build all those Notions, which ever he shall have naturally in this World. (II, i, 24)

17. The arbitrariness of Locke's assumption of the positivity of that "something, we know not what" in which the qualities of phenomena subsist is suggested by the syntactical similarity between one passage from the Essay in which he describes substance and another from the introduction to a recent volume in which Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser seek to do the same for negativity. Locke writes, "of Substance, we have no Idea of what it is, but only a confused obscure one of what it does" (II, xiii, 19); Budick and Iser: "in order to evoke the multifariousness of negativity and to suggest how it can allow the unsayable to speak, negativity can only be described in terms of its operations and not by any means in terms of a graspable entity" (xii-xiii). In both cases, the object itself is available to cognition only in terms of its effects or operations.

Chapter Three. "Empty Sounds"

1. There are no page numbers in the Dictionary. References to passages from the "Preface," therefore, will be identified by the paragraph in which they appear. Definitions or examples quoted from specific definitions will be cited by the name of the
headword under which that quotation appears (eg. *Lexicography*). References to
Johnson's *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* will be identified by page
number.

2. To be sure, Johnson had much about which to feel oppressed by the time he was
bringing the *Dictionary* to completion, foremost among which was doubtless the death
of his wife Tetty in 1752. The deep sense of loss and loneliness which Johnson
experienced in her absence is evident not only in the "Preface" but in his *Prayers and
Meditations* as well.

3. Derrida's comments on the fate of a secret code are relevant to the problematic specific
to a dead language:

Imagine a writing whose code would be so idiomatic as to be established
and known, as secret cipher, by only two 'subjects.' Could we maintain
that, following the death of the receiver, or even of both partners, the
mark left by one of them is still writing? Yes, to the extent that,
organized by a code, even an unknown and nonlinguistic one, it is
constituted in its identity as mark by its iterability, in the absence of such
and such a person, and hence ultimately of every empirically determined
'subject.' This implies that there is no such thing as a code -- organon
of iterability -- which could be structurally secret. The possibility of
repeating and thus of identifying the marks is implicit in every code,
making it into a network [*une grille*] that is communicable, transmittable,
decipherable, iterable for a third, and hence for every possible user in
general. To be what it is, all writing must, therefore, be capable of
functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined
receiver in general. (*SEC 7-8*)

4. Derrida continues:

What holds for the receiver holds also, for the same reasons, for
the sender or the producer. To write is to produce a mark that will
constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten. (SEC 8)

5. Johnson's predicament recalls Derrida's description of the two ways of conceiving the "limit of totalization": the classical/empirical and the nonclassical. In the former (which Johnson articulates in his "dream of a poet") the field is inexhaustible because of its magnitude: "there is too much, more than one can say" (SSP 289). Derrida argues, and Johnson's "awakening" to the reality of lexicography suggests, however, that "nontotalization" may also arise "not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance [here, we may think of Priestley's occasional references to the possibility of taking in entire subjects "at a glance"] or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field . . . excludes totalization" (289). The field, in other words, is inexhaustible not because there is "too much" but because there is not enough. This fundamental lack (of identity, or, as Derrida says, "of a centre or origin" [289]) constitutes a structural limit to totalization which no empirical endeavour can master: every attempt to saturate that lack and complete the system produces a surplus which necessarily exceeds the system, leaving the object of knowledge hovering like the Arcadian's elusive sun, out of reach, always "at the same distance from them" (par. 72). For more on this crucial Derridean notion, see Balachandra Rajan's The Form of the Unfinished, pp. 102-3.
6. Howard D. Weinbrot, for example, claims that with the "Preface" Johnson "overtly rejected much of the Plan" (79). The rejection, however, is not as overt or as clear-cut as he claims. To his credit, two of the three points in the Preface to which Weinbrot refers do actually comment on the Plan: first, Johnson's disenchantment with the idea that "every quotation should be useful to some other end than that illustration of a word" (par. 57; qtd. in Weinbrot 79); and second, his recognition of the impossibility of ever absolutely fixing the language (par. 84). In both cases, however, by reading the Plan through the "Preface," Weinbrot ignores the provisional manner in which Johnson advances both of these propositions. Concerning the first, for example, the Johnson of the Plan is far less categorical in his desire that quotations should "be useful to some other end than the illustration of a word" (79) than either Weinbrot, or the later Johnson suggest. In the Plan we read that, although he will select such sentences which "as besides their immediate use, may give pleasure or instruction by conveying some elegance of language, or some precept of prudence, or piety," he will do so, he writes, only "when it can be conveniently done" (31). Regarding the second, moreover, while Johnson certainly does maintain that "one great end of this undertaking is to fix the English language" (11), it is not an end which, even in the Plan, he demonstrates much confidence of ever satisfactorily achieving. As he also writes in the Plan, "though art may sometimes prolong" the duration of words, "it will rarely give them perpetuity, and their changes will be almost always informing us, that language is the work of man, of a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be achieved" (18).
Beyond these points, however, Weinbrot also cites as evidence of Johnson's overt rejection of the *Plan* a desire for which there is no evidence in that work but which appears only in the "Preface" and then as an abandoned dream. This is Johnson's ambitious hope to produce an encyclopedic dictionary. There is nothing of this in the *Plan*. It therefore seems clear that to agree with Weinbrot's argument that, with the "Preface" Johnson "admits" that "major parts of the *Plan* dedicated to Chesterfield . . . were excessive in their demands on the lexicographer, the products of pride and self-flattery, recordings of a dream, and indulgences of the irrational and na[il]ve" (79) is to read the *Plan* uncritically through the lens of the "Preface" and thus efface the manner in which the *Plan* inscribes failure as intrinsic to the project. The relation of the two texts is a complex one. To impose a thematics of vanity upon the trajectory formed between them as does Weinbrot is to ignore a rhetoric of failure which appears in both texts and thus impoverish the subtle confrontation with language which those texts illuminate.

8. "Uttered in a moment," Balfour writes, "enacting itself in a moment, whether or not it corresponds to the integrity of an intention or a will, the promise is oriented towards an unknown future that has already been changed by its very utterance" (7). We will examine performativity, particularly in its relation to prophecy, in Chapter Six.

9. In "Shelley Disfigured," de Man writes, "language posits and language means (since it articulates) but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) it in its reconfirmed falsehood" (117-8).

10. But what would a complete and perfect dictionary be? Absolutely comprehensive, it would, paradoxically, be coextensive, perhaps indistinguishable, from language itself. Such a possibility raises the problem which Derrida discusses in "Structure, Sign, and Play": the perfect mapping of a dictionary onto its object of knowledge, requires the totalizing vision of the "engineer" who could somehow create the dictionary from outside of language and not, like the bricoleur, from "the means at hand" (285). What tools might the lexicographical engineer employ to construct a perfect image of a language? Unlike a bridge or even a book, a dictionary is put together from the very stuff it seeks to represent. As such, the lexicographer is necessarily a bricoleur.

11. Desire has two faces. The near face is that of a wish for totality; the far face the lack which this wish necessarily marks. Desire, we might say, consists in the oscillation between these two faces.
12. Paul de Man neatly summarizes the complex relationship between the terms language and death and the unrepresentable dimension of which they are figures in his often-cited formulation, "death is a displaced figure for a linguistic predicament" (AD 81). The predicament lies in the fact that language occurs only by virtue of the effacement of the space of difference which inaugurates signification, an opening which is beyond the reach of language to represent and for which the word "language" can only serve as a futile sort of figure in the same way that "death" is only a figure for that senselessness for which we take it to stand -- that is, a figure which ultimately reveals nothing but the impossibility of knowing that which the word apparently identifies.


14. Hedrick, for example, claims that the Dictionary demonstrates the desire which Johnson shared with Locke "to render the process of definition technically exact, largely in the hope of clarifying contemporary speech and writing, but also in the hope of reducing, if not eradicating, confusions in meaning in the future" (424). Similarly, DeMaria claims that Johnson's extensive use of quotation, his selection of sources, and
the subject matter of many of the quotations he uses indicate a "fundamentally Lockean" (159) view of language.

15. Reddick notes "It is clear . . . that at the urging of [the bookseller Robert] Dodsley, Johnson recognized the advantages which could accrue from having the public figure of Chesterfield, with his perceived authority on linguistic matters (or at least polite usage) associated with the project" (19). For accounts of the vexed relationship between Johnson and Chesterfield and reflections concerning its impact on the Plan and Dictionary, see Sledd and Kolb, pp. 85-105, Weinbrot, and Reddick, pp. 17-20.

16. As we shall see, this use of history as a means of motivating language will be deployed in a millennialist context by Joseph Priestley. The history which both Johnson and Priestley invoke, however, is one in which all traces of historicity's disruptive dimension (de Man's "modernity") have been effaced. In this regard, a passage from Georges Van Den Abbeele's Introduction to the recent volume Community at Loose Ends is most pertinent. Discussing notions of immanence which underlie Christian, Marxist, and liberal notions of community and the determinate notion of history crucial to each, Van Den Abbeele comments

The providentialism of such a discourse clearly belies the claim to historicism since, theoretically speaking and as Hegel understood so well in the preface to the Phenomenology, history is already necessarily over if its end has been determined and if what remains before the end is but the inessential epiphenomenon of a time that can henceforth only be marked as dead. (xiii)
Chapter Four. Curing the Body of Language

1. More recently, Derrida has written, "but a context, always, remains open, thus fallible and insufficient" (Specters of Marx xvii).

2. See the passage from Frey's essay "Spume" quoted here, p. 5.


4. The remark is consistent with a comment Johnson makes earlier in the "Preface" in which he compares the English language to a garden which, for lack of proper care, has "spread under the direction of chance, into wild exuberance, resigned to the tyranny of time and fashion, and exposed to the corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation" (par. 3).

5. As Derrida notes in Positions, to attribute such presence to difference, the trace, or spacing, is to ascribe to it a transcendent status, something which he is scrupulously careful to avoid. "Spacing," writes Derrida, "certainly operates in all fields, but precisely as different fields. And its operation is different each time, articulated otherwise" (Positions 82).

6. To be more accurate, we might say that the limit circulates through all that is designated with a name, that is, through all that withdraws itself with the imposition of the proper name.

9. See p. 47.


11. "To be is to be incomplete, unfulfilled," writes George Steiner in his book on Heidegger (104).

12. As Christopher Fynsk points out in his introduction to the English translation of Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, "the experience of death cannot be thought solely as the experience of the dead other" (xvi).

13. It is necessary to put this passage in the context of paragraph 71 in which Johnson makes the blanket statement: "Many terms appropriated to particular occupations, though necessary and significant, are undoubtedly omitted." Johnson's original design for the *Dictionary* was, however, much more inclusive. Indeed, the decisions he describes in the "Preface" seems at odds with the necessity he had described earlier in the *Plan*:
It seems necessary to the completion of a dictionary design'd not merely for critics but for popular use, that it should comprise, in some degree, the peculiar words of every profession; that the terms of war and navigation should be inserted so far as they can be required by readers of travels, and of history; and those of law, merchandise and mechanical trades, so far as they can be supposed useful in the occurrences of common life. (7)


15. The arbitrariness of this logic, along with its great political efficacy, is apparent in the manner in which the exclusion of the language of a particular group from the Dictionary further erodes the basis for any claim to legitimacy or authority members of that group whose discourse is deemed "unworthy" might make. A tautology is at the centre of it, however: because the language of the "mercantile and laborious" classes is "mutable," it is "unworthy of preservation." Clearly, however, that which is "durable" stands in no need of preservation. It is in such contradictions as this that the ideological dimension of Johnson's Dictionary is most readily apparent.

Chapter Five. The Inscription of Labour

1. In a note added to footnote 16 of the Fourth Edition of Volume One of Capital, Engels comments, "The English language has the advantage of possessing different words for the two aspects of labour here considered. The labour which creates Use-Value, and
counts qualitatively is Work, as distinguished from Labour; that which creates Value and counts quantitatively, is Labour as distinguished from Work" (47).

2. The appeal of feudal hierarchy and the stability with which it was associated is apparent in Johnson in the respect he maintained for the principle of social subordination. As Thomas Woodman has noted, Johnson's approval of subordination was based on a belief that the rich and powerful have a responsibility to care for those below them in the social ladder. Although Johnson elsewhere endorses the possibility of social mobility, justice for all members of society is best served, he held, within a hierarchical social structure. Confronted with the apparent contradiction in his thought, Johnson responded, "Why Sir, I reconcile my principles very well, because mankind are happier in a state of inequality and subordination" (Boswell II, 21).

3. See also Louis Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. Althusser regards Marx's labour theory of value in terms of valorization. The theory, he write, is "intelligible only as a special case of a theory which Marx and Engels called the 'law of value' or the law of the distribution of the available labour power between the various branches of production, a distribution indispensable to the reproduction of the conditions of production" (91).

4. Marx also notes in The German Ideology that, "As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce (qtd in Elson 123).
5. Elson notes:

Distribution of social labour is not an adequate metaphor for this process of determination, because such distribution always begins from some pre-given, fixed, determinate structure, which is placed outside the process of social determination. What is required is a conceptualisation of a process of social determination that proceeds from the indeterminate to the determinate; from the potential to the actual; from the formless to the formed. *Capital* is an attempt to provide just that. (129-30)

6. Elson bases her remark on Marx:

... We can see at a glance that in our capitalist society a given portion of labour is supplied alternatively in the form of tailoring and in the form of weaving, in accordance with changes in the direction of the demand for labour. This change in the form of labour may well not take place without friction, but it must take place. (*Capital*, I, 314; qtd. in Elson 128-29)

7. Among the other causes Johnson cites for the "transformation of language" (par. 86) are conquests and migration ("now very rare"), but also international commerce, the rise of the sciences, fashion, and translation.

Chapter Six. The Rhetoric of Consequence: Joseph Priestley and the Apocalypse of Language

1. As James Sambrook notes:

Priestley shaped and was shaped by the famous Warrington Academy, the cradle of Unitarianism and a centre of radical politics, scientific progress, and academic excellence, which for its brief life from 1757 to 1786 challenged the intellectual leadership of Oxford and Cambridge. (35)
Priestley taught at Warrington from 1761 to 1767. See H. McLachlan, H., Warrington Academy: History and Influence.

2. As we have seen, Locke observes that, "Because Men would not be thought to talk barely of their own Imaginations, but of Things as really they are; . . . they often suppose their Words to stand also for the reality of Things" (407).

3. This, of course, was one of Locke’s preoccupations, a point which we have seen Aarsleff take up in his observation that

   Locke said that speakers habitually believe that words are as good as things, "as if the name carried with it the knowledge of the species or the essence of it," thus assuming that language is a safe and simple nomenclature to the inventory of the world. This belief is a serious mistake, however. Words are about ideas, not about things; but the mistake is tenacious, "for without this double conformity of their ideas, they find they should both think amiss of things themselves, and talk of them unintelligibly to others." (LS 24)

4. We should be careful to distinguish prophecy and apocalypse as two different but related things. While derived from prophecy, apocalyptic writing retains a special character and orientation. As Alice Parmelee explains

   Prophecy summons people to righteous living; an apocalypse encourages people to endure their present suffering by showing them that their reward and deliverance is at hand. Prophecy has its feet on the ground. An apocalypse is in the clouds. The prophets stood up and spoke their own message. The authors of the apocalypses wrote anonymously and attributed their work to the distant past. (77-8)
5. This alchemical association is almost literally the case with Thomas Urquhart's outrageous *Ekskubalauron* (1652), the title of which Large says "is supposed to be an abbreviated Greek phrase meaning gold from a dung hill" (19).

6. Wilkins' work should be distinguished from that of the more esoteric proponents of the Adamic doctrine such as Jacob Boehme and, particularly, Robert Fludd. Wilkins was a scientist and, as such, ridiculed such mystical notions as that of an Adamic language. Despite such objections, however, Wilkins "real character" is based on certain assumptions concerning language (for example, that language is a nomenclature) implicit in the Adamic model.

7. Priestley's *Lectures* actually refer to a philosophical language developed by Dr. Wallis, presumably Dr. John Wallis, a founding member of the Royal Society. This is most certainly an error. Although Wallis's *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* (1653) is considered "one of the landmarks in the history of linguistics in England" (Alston, N. pag.), it is primarily a work of grammar, not a universal, philosophical language. Priestley's intended reference is probably Dr. John Wilkins, another founder of the Royal Society. This possibility is suggested by three things. First, Priestley's description of the philosophical language he attributes to Wallis matches that of Wilkins' *An essay Towards a real character* (1668), generally considered to be one of the "most interesting and most fully developed" (Large 27) of the seventeenth-century universal language projects. Secondly, Wallis' text is not listed among Priestley's "References," although
"Wilkins's Essay is; and thirdly, the table of contents to Priestley's Lectures cites the page on which the reference to Wallis occurs as providing "A Sketch of that [philosophical language] of Dr. Wilkins" (312).

8. In his book Sensible Words, Murray Cohen suggests Priestley held out little hope for the prospect of a universal language (89). Such an assertion, however, seems to contradict the rhetorical grain of Priestley's works on language as it does his providential conception of history.

9. Andrew Large notes that by the time Priestley was writing, "The great seventeenth-century language projectors were scarcely remembered at all." He gives the example of James Burnet, Lord Monboddo, who

   Following a fairly detailed account of John Wilkins's scheme in his book, Of the origin and progress of language (1774), . . . apologetically explained that "I know many of my readers will think that I have given a fuller account . . . than was necessary or proper; but [the Essay] is little known." (56-7)

10. This notion stems from Priestley's argument that, the greater "the progress he has made in intellect, and his advancement above mere animal nature" (Government 2), the greater is man's ability to contemplate and comprehend past and future, that is, the more the past (memory) and the future (expectation) permeate man's consciousness in the present. See Peter N. Miller's Introduction to An Essay on the First Principles of Government.
11. For Rousseau's theories on the origin of language see his *Discourse on the origin of inequality among men* (1755) and the posthumously published *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1781).

12. Priestley, no less than Locke, contends that words are related to ideas: recall, for example, his observation that speakers confuse "the ideas of words with the ideas of things" (293). Unlike Locke, however, Priestley's vision of the relationship of words and ideas occurs in a millennialist framework. As such, meanings are motivated by the promise of a perfect knowledge in which our ideas along with the words which signify them, will reflect the true nature of the things for which those words and ideas stand.

13. If prior to its millennial perfection language is significant primarily as an event, it is not surprising that in some of his later works, Priestley describes certain historical events, notably ones of either Christian or republican interest, in terms comparable to those which would characterize a universal, philosophical language. For example, in a passage from his *Essay on the One Great End of the Life and Death of Christ*, Priestley attributes a transparent intelligibility to those facts of the life of Christ which remain when all the different interpretations of those facts have cancelled one another out. He refers to this self-articulating residue "the language of the naked facts" and notes that they "cannot but be understood wherever they are known" (205). In his *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1791), Priestley discusses the significance of the events of the French Revolution in similar terms: "Such events as these teach the doctrine of liberty, civil and
religious with infinitely greater clearness and force than a thousand treatises on the subject. They speak a language intelligible to all the world, and preach a doctrine congenial to every human heart" (qtd. in Passmore 251).

14. Here we should be careful to note that such limits apply only to specific languages and not to the final universal, philosophical language.

15. Ian Balfour explores the material dimension of speech acts in works by Elizabeth Inchbald and William Godwin in "Promises, Promises: Social and Other Contracts in the English Jacobins (Godwin/Inchbald)." See also "Promises" and "Excuses," the concluding chapters of Paul de Man's Allegories of Reading. For a competent discussion of the poststructuralist encounter with Speech Act Theory, see Sandy Petrey’s Speech Acts and Literary Theory.

16. See the essays and other material collect in the Northwestern University Press volume entitled Limited Inc.

17. See Chapter Two, note 3.

18. Priestley here seems to engage in an attempt to valorize his own labour, a tendency which, as we have said in Part Two, also characterizes Johnson's Dictionary.

19. The OED notes that "caprice" is derived from the Italian "capriccio," or "sudden start." Originally, however, it meant "horror."
20. By the same token, Priestley is only able to consider the performative element at work in language by imagining its imminent destruction, along with the extermination of relativity, difference, and contingency which attends it, and which will be realized with the final triumph of science.

Chapter Seven. History as Diversion: John Horne Tooke and the Politics of Difference

1. Smith does acknowledge certain difficulties in the work, but attributes them either to factors involved in the production of the text or to the work’s method. For example, she writes, that the fact the work was written over three decades and remained unfinished:

   raises difficulties in discussing ‘the work’ as if it were a single and compact entity. In some respects the volumes differ from each other, as one might expect of ideas formulated over a period of thirty years. Moreover, by concentrating on disproving others’ theories, Tooke fails to produce a coherent theory of his own. The discrepancies and omissions are not brought under control in a definitive statement of his own theory of language. (117)

   At no point, however, does Smith suggest that these discrepancies, and this incoherence arise for any reason other than a failure on the part of Horne Tooke.

2. In the second volume, only H. and Sir Francis Burdett (F.), another friend of Horne Tooke’s, take part in the conversation.
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