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ROUSSEAU IN MANDEVILLE'S SHADOW

My purpose in this paper is to examine a neglected facet of Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*,¹ its discussion of language, and then to show how Mandeville's arguments shaped and finally defeated Rousseau's political objectives. Rousseau's own writing about language forms an essential part of the Enlightenment controversy on language origins which runs at least from Locke to Herder, and includes the work of some of the finest minds of the era.² Time does not permit a review of this controversy, or a detailed linkage of Mandeville with Rousseau through Condillac's seminal *Essai*, the most influential eighteenth-century text on the subject.³ My essay today will focus instead on a conceptual relationship, but its point is meant to be historical: that Rousseau intended to come to terms with Mandeville's arguments about language and that his

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1. *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 2 vols., F.B. Kaye, ed. References will appear parenthetically in the text.
 2. See Paul Kuehner, *Theories on the Origin and Formation of Language in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944) and Lia Formigari, *Linguistica e Antropologia nel Secundo Settecento* (Messina: Editrice La Libra, 1972). The most valuable discussions of the philosophical presuppositions of this controversy are Hans Aarsleff, "Leibniz and Locke on Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy Before Herder," in *From Locke to Saussure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 42-83 and 146-209, and David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's 'Laocoon'. Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), pp. 1-42. See too, G.A. Wells, "Condillac, Rousseau and Herder on the Origin of Language," *SVEC* 230 (1985): 233-246.
 3. For a fuller version of this paper and an extended account of the historical connection between Mandeville's *Fable* (1723 and 1728), Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) and Rousseau's argument about language, see E.J. Hundert, "The Thread of Language and the Web of Dominion: Mandeville to Rousseau and Back," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 21, 2 (Winter 1987/88).

failure to do so successfully constitutes a decisive feature of his thought.

Mandeville's discussion of language began from the presumption that men were initially solitary brutes endowed with potential for reason and speech, capacities which remained wholly dormant until they were called forth by need and desire. This claim, that languages were human and conventional rather than divine and natural, had prestigious support in Locke's demolition of the orthodox Adamic doctrine that in a pre-lapsarian language of divine institution words once named the essential quality of things. But Mandeville had few epistemological interests and he ignored the arguments of Book III of *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Instead, Mandeville was interested in language as a vehicle of socialization and an instrument of power. In approaching the original function of articulate sounds he denied that "the design of speech is to make our thoughts known to others." (II:289) He continued:

The first Sign or Sound was made . . . for the use of him who made it; to persuade others . . . [of] what [he] would have them believe . . . [and have them] entirely in his power.

Mandeville argued that language had its origins in the need to express emotion rather than in any desire to transmit knowledge. The purpose of expression was to announce men's "Wants and their Will" (II:290) in a project of persuasion where words could not be conceived apart from the voices which utter them. The origin of language, therefore, raised for Mandeville the question of authority, since language use had as its primary object the self-regarding interests of speakers in dominating their respondents.

The "wild couples" living in nature were at first speechless brutes who communicated by cries and "dumb Signs." (II:286-287) Endowed with common gestural signals of their primitive mental states, the first savages would effortlessly comprehend each other's expressions of emotion. This original state of communicative competence permitted an unselfconscious understanding of shared needs. A conventional language of verbal signs, Mandeville continued, originated in reflection upon these gestural regularities and in the convenience, recognized only after centuries, of aurally marking objects not immediately present to sensation. The longer men lived together "the greater Variety of Sounds they would invent . . . for

Actions . . . [and for] things themselves." "Every Generation" would improve upon these sounds, "and this," Mandeville said, "must have been the Origin of All Languages, and [of] Speech itself" (II:288) Reason and reflection would then polish and perfect verbal languages, increase their precision, and increase as well the ability of the more sagacious to employ words in the service of their own ends.

Mandeville's was one of the earliest anti-Adamic and evolutionary sketches of the development of language directed only by need and use. In the architecture of *The Fable*, however, this argument was not meant to stand on its own. It was intended to supplement "An Enquiry Into the Origin of Moral Virtue," the work's most radical part, in which Mandeville claimed that "all untaught Animals are only solicitous of pleasing themselves, and naturally follow the bent of their own Inclinations." (I:41-57) In the "wild State of Nature," he argued, only those creatures having the fewest appetites to gratify and the least self-understanding were fit to live together in peace. No species of animal is less inclined to society than man, that creature of almost infinite selfish desires who is too headstrong and cunning to be subdued by force alone. Yet "no creature besides himself can ever be made sociable," (I:41) and no animal is more in need of society than this one, the least sociable by nature.

Mandeville set about exploring this paradox by posing another: those impulses which dispose men to seek their own satisfactions also make them fit subjects for manipulation. The "Lawgivers and other wise men" who civilized the race convinced others "that it was more beneficial for every Body to conquer than indulge his appetites, and much better to mind the Public than what seemed his private interest." (I:42) They contrived "imaginary" rewards in place of "real" ones, and the transformation of brutes into sociable creatures begins with the substitution of real by these imaginary objects of desire. No man, Mandeville argued, was "either so savage as not to be charmed with praise, or so despicable as patiently to bear contempt." (I:42) Flattery was thus the "bewitching Engine" used to tame savages by promoting within them a conception of self which has as part of its content the opinions of others. And once the arts of flattery "insinuated themselves into the Hearts of Men," they were instructed in the rhetoric of honour and shame, in the ideals of public service and the symbolic rewards of praise.

The multitudes were convinced by "arguments" of those seeking to rule them that a supposed conquest of impulse was the highest

principle of moral judgement. "This was . . . the manner after which savage man was broke," (I:46) since the "first rudiments of morality" rendered men tractable so that the ambitious might more easily command the rest. Mandeville thus conceived of the civilizing process as beginning in rhetoric. A sustained verbal performance by the strong subdued the innocent through their own consent,

to call every thing which . . . Man should commit to gratify . . . any of his Appetites, VICE . . . And to give the Name of VIRTUE to every Performance by which Man, contrary to the impulse of Nature, should endeavor the Benefit of others, or the Conquest of his own Passions out of a Rational Ambition of being good. (I:48)

This "invention of Lawgivers" served on the one hand as a hypothetical point of origin, a founding moment deduced from the trajectory of civilized intercourse.⁴ On the other hand, civilization had to be understood as a slow and gradual consolidation of this original ideological achievement, "by which a rational Creature is kept in Awe for Fear of it Self, and an Idol is set up, that shall be its own Worshipper."⁵

Mandeville's account of the origins of civilization and morality, then, had a direct bearing upon his speculations about language. He conceived of the passage from conditions of innate, gestural communication to the circumstances surrounding articulate discourse as the movement from nature to artifice. Moral virtue became "the Political Offspring which Flattery begot upon Pride" (I:51) through the conventional speech acts of naming and agreement. They marked not so much the progress of cognition as the construction of a latticed framework of deception in which men who commanded words commanded as well the assent of others. As their vocabularies and stock of idioms grew, the polished manipulators whose moral anatomy Mandeville sought to expose were precisely those inhabitants of advanced societies in which natural forms of gestural expression had been reduced to remnants of public speech and theatrical contrivance. In backward nations which retained powerful gestural components in their communicative practices, and so still exchanged natural

4. It was also most likely an ironic reversal of Cicero's republican claims about the civilizing function of eloquence in *De Inventione*, I, 2, and *De Oratore*, I, 8.

5. *Enquiry into the Origins of Honour* [1732], (London: Cass, 1971), M.M. Goldsmith, ed., p. 41.

"tokens" of feeling "without guile," men were startlingly less successful in the repressive but rewarding and productive disciplines of modern life.

The aim of Mandeville's account of language was to arouse concern over the apparent contradiction between the march of civilization and articulate speech on the one hand, and the decay of naturally expressive forms of sympathy on the other. He employed a specific strategy of argument to achieve this effect. Mandeville meant to implicate the reader of *The Fable* in his own applause for the spectacular ability of modern societies to create wealth, and then through irony to detach him from the moral justifications of these societies by exposing their rhetorical strategies for concealing sheer self-interest. The enormous impact of *The Fable* was due in part to Mandeville's having adopted the ancient distinction between language as a mechanism of rational argument and speech as a method of seduction, refined by moralists like Bayle to whom his understanding of the passions was indebted.⁶ In his own account of moral virtue Mandeville then dissolved forms of argument into the modes of rhetoric through which men were seduced, and seduced themselves, into the shackles of self-denial. Articulate speech made possible the deceptions required for civilization, whose pleasures were sustained on the ruins of transparent gestural understanding.

One of the subversive features of Mandeville's argument was its antique provenance. He quoted Lucretius to support the claim that men were not naturally sociable, and his own account of language origins resembled in detail the one given in *De Rerum Natura*,⁷ then hailed as the most complete system of atheism in print. This was one of the primary affinities between Mandeville and Rousseau, whose *Second Discourse*⁸ and its intended supplement, the *Essay on The*

6. Thomas Horne, *The Social Thought of Bernard Mandeville* (London: Macmillan, 1978), ch. 1. Mandeville was unaware of the most significant contemporary engagement with this tradition, that of Vico. For this see Paulo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time. The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*. (Chicago: University Press, 1984), trans. Lydia D. Cochrane, especially pp. 246-250, and Michael Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric* (Princeton: University Press), pp. 171-186 and 210-216.
7. Book V, 1028-1090, translated by Thomas Creech in 1700 and available in at least six Latin editions published since 1675.
8. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality* (New-York: St.Martin's, 1964), trans. Roger D. Masters; hereafter, *Second Discourse*.

Origin of Languages,⁹ effectively transformed the Enlightenment concern with the history of language into a generalized problem of politics. Like Condillac, whose arguments about language he followed,¹⁰ Rousseau drew upon the 1740 French translation of *The Fable* as a source of his own speculation. For him, the record of cognitive progress mapped by the development of language was the secondary effect of a forgotten social history whose excavation would, Rousseau argued, reveal that the appearance of articulate speech involved a rupture between nature and culture, ended the isolation of individuals and all but crippled their power to express themselves without cunning and artifice. The history of language, in other words, was above all for Rousseau part of the history of morals, and his attempts to recover the repressed deposits of this history were meant to show how the evolution of language was implicated in the aberrant course of social evolution.¹¹

Rousseau modelled his hypothetical history of the emergence of culture on an Epicurean account of the evolution of humanity, which he laced with Lucretian allusions.¹² He sought to describe in a rigorously naturalistic fashion the passage from a conjectural state of nature to that of society because his objective was to foreground

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9. *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Charles Porset, ed. (Bordeaux: Ducros 1970), hereafter, *E.O.L.*
 10. *Second Discourse*, p. 120. In *The Confessions*, Book 7, Rousseau claims to have been the first to recognize Condillac's true worth. The two dined together weekly along with Diderot while Condillac was composing the *Essai*, for which Rousseau asked Diderot to find a publisher. See *The Confessions* (London: Penguin, 1954), trans. J.M. Cohen, pp. 324-325.
 11. Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 168-200 and 356-379, remains the best account of these ruptures and of Rousseau's arguments about language. See too, on the same subject, Jacques Derrida, "Genesis and Structure of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*," in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), trans. G. Spivak, pp. 165-268; Michèle Duchet and Michel Launay, "Synchronie et diachronie: l'*Essai sur l'origine des langues et le second Discours*," *Revue internationale de Philosophie*, 21 (1967): 421-442, and compare Paul de Man, "Metaphor (*Second Discourse*)," *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 135-159.
 12. Jean Morel, "Recherches sur les sources du Discours sur l'Inégalité," *Annales de la Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 5 (1909): 163-164. See too, Roger D. Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton: University Press, 1968), pp. 170-176, and Frederick Vaughan, *The Tradition of Political Hedonism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 119-129.

the radical discontinuities between any scientifically plausible description of elementary human requirements and the insatiable desires of socialized men. While he explicitly distanced his imagined savages in the states of nature from those in *The Fable* by enhancing the role of pity in their hearts, "which Mandeville understood so well," Rousseau's speechless brutes with elementary cognitive endowments were the striking counterparts of Mandeville's primitives, whose physical impulses and self-love (*amour de soi-même*) conditioned their behavior.¹³ Like the creatures in *The Fable*, the isolates inhabiting Rousseau's natural state "did not require a language much more refined than that of monkeys . . . , [composed of] inarticulate cries, many gestures and some imitative noises."¹⁴

Rousseau's hypothesis about the origins of language sought radically to distance the sources of speech from basic human needs by representing the first hominoids as living in an epoch of satisfaction and perfect communicative immediacy. Gesture, exclamation and glance he understood as unmediated physical expressions of sentiment, as paintings of the passions rather than conventional signs of information. Following Mandeville, Rousseau then tied the problem of language origins to that of the origins of societies and linked the process of social formation to cognitively creative acts amongst the first language users. He thus tried to secure a theoretical foundation from which he could point to the yawning gulf between nature and culture and so pose the question of language origins as a paradox. "For if men needed speech in order to learn to think," Rousseau argued, "they had even greater need of knowing how to think in order to discover the art of speech."¹⁵

Rousseau declared the question of language origins to be "insoluble" so as to emphasize the chasm between biological impulse and the deformed habits of a socialized second nature.¹⁶ His point was that the first agreements among men, including the conventions required for speech, could be traced to no set of natural necessities. Any account of the passage to civility would thus have to depend upon "hypothetical and conditional reasonings like those our own

13. *Second Discourse*, p. 131, and see Malcom Jack, "One State of Nature: Mandeville and Rousseau," *JHI* 39 (1978): 119-124.

14. *Second Discourse*, p. 144.

15. *Second Discourse*, pp. 120 and 121-2.

16. *Second Discourse*, p. 126.

physicists make every day concerning the formation of the world.”¹⁷ These conjectures were the philosophical corollaries of scientific theories which bring the apparently random forces of nature, what Rousseau called, in Lucretian fashion, “accidents,” into a productive conceptual order.¹⁸ The modes of language use were an essential feature of this project of genetic reconstruction since language and socialization formed the crucially dependent variables in the emergence of civility.¹⁹

Two models of socialization connected by a set of perverse and radically deforming speech acts anchored Rousseau's conception. Born from cries for help, articulate speech emerged from its expressive gestural sources only with the formation of pre-political communities in which mutual dependencies called forth a common idiom.²⁰ While physical needs, directly expressed in cry and gesture, promoted no social impulses, speech marks the emergence of “love, hatred, pity and anger,” passions which compel men to seek one another's company. Language was thus “the first social institution.”²¹ Rousseau understood this original language as figural, poetic and musical; following Mandeville he saw in its gestural survivals the sources of the compelling, pre-analytical power of elementary need.

A simple and methodical analytic language only slowly developed when men found it necessary to form general, abstract ideas under whose description similar objects could be comprehended. Yet

17. *Second Discourse*, p. 103.

18. *Second Discourse*, p. 143. For the relation between traditions of natural philosophy and instrumentalist conceptions of scientific theories, see Francis Oakley, “Christian Theology and the Newtonian Science: The Rise of the Concept of the Laws of Nature,” *Church History*, 30 (1961): 433-457; Margaret Osler, “Providence and Divine Will in Gassendi's Views of Scientific Knowledge,” *JHI*, 44 (1983): 549-560, and, generally, R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press reprint, 1984). Mandeville's proto-Kuhnian commitment to instrumentalism can be found in *Treatise on Hypochondrical Passions* . . . (London, 1730), 2nd ed., pp. 123-127.

19. Rousseau addresses this problem in the *Second Discourse*, Part II, and in its intended supplement, the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, completed in 1761 but published posthumously in 1781.

20. *Second Discourse*, p. 143.

21. *E.O.L.*, pp. 27 and 43.

the practice of supporting speech with gesture continued long after it was strictly necessary for the transmission of information. This gestural mother-language persisted at the sacred centers of early communal life because through it one came into direct contact with elemental needs. The Jewish prophets and Greek lawgivers spoke in what Mandeville had called "the language of the eyes." They communicated, Rousseau claimed, "more effectively to the eye than to the ear," for each intuitively grasped that the force of vocal discourse encouraged calculation rather than genuine human bonds.²² This language of action continued through the long period of agriculture and metallurgy, the happiest era of social life, in which the figurally enriched modes of gesture, pantomime, song and dance permitted almost unmediated transmissions of feeling.²³

As the birth of society was signaled by the emergence of language, its decline for Rousseau is triggered by "the most deliberate project that ever entered the human mind," the effort to separate in an auditor's imagination reality and appearance through the seductive manipulation of words. Rousseau describes a heightened Mandevillian moment of rhetorical duplicity in which "the speech of the rich man" inspires commoners with "maxims" as advantageous to him as the natural order of things served to his detriment. An ideology of mutual benefit and protection then comes to mask the dominance of the propertied whose power it sanctifies.

The first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors would the human race have been spared by someone who . . . had shouted to his fellow men: Beware of listening to this imposter . . .²⁴

It is important to notice that the rich man is the first individual represented by Rousseau in *The Second Discourse*. He is also the first person Rousseau permits to speak, and the speech of "this imposter" is undertaken in order to deceive others into agreeing to the fraud of property rights. The success of this "true founder of civil society," this

22. *E.O.L.*, p. 8.

23. *Second Discourse*, p. 149.

24. *Second Discourse*, pp. 141-142.

lawgiver who inaugurates the socialization of the race, depends upon others lacking a counter-discourse, on the absence of a mode of communication which could resist the power of abstract argument and expose his calculating reason as the vehicle of self-interest.²⁵ Just as Rousseau described the history of language itself as an irreversible process of separation between music and speech, the figural and analytic, feeling and calculation, the passage into political society embodies for him the disfiguring incoherence between authentic expression and a discourse which masks desire. Speech proves to be the instrument by which men forge the chains which later enslave them.

Rousseau sought to recover the lost, primal eloquence of communities before their rhetorical fall, a mode of speaking which could command the affections without appealing to interest.²⁶ The sonorous, harmonious oratory favorable to liberty had little to do with modern tongues. Unless they voiced the hopes of unlettered peoples, these languages were only "made for murmuring on couches."²⁷ In place of promiscuous public speech, addressed to calculating reason, Rousseau evoked in *The Social Contract* the discourse of Moses and Lycurgus, archetypal legislators who could "win over without violence and persuade without convincing,"²⁸ moral giants who spoke with the elemental force of a primal language and founded polities in sacred oratorical acts. The Romans, whose virtue Rousseau wished to revive, similarly mastered a pre-articulate language of signs. Their dress, ornaments, buildings and ceremonies silently impressed duty on the hearts of citizens, just as silence shields the electorate of Rousseau's ideal state from the rhetoric of interest politics as in

25. This point is Starobinski's, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, p. 365.

26. See Bronislaw Baczko, "La cité et ses langues," in *Rousseau After 200 Years*, pp. 87-108.

27. *E.O.L.*, p. 199.

28. *Social Contract*, Book 2, ch. 7.

isolation they deliberate all questions concerning the common good.²⁹

If Rousseau dramatized the true legislator's need of a repertoire of verbal signs to arm model republicans against the seductions of civilization, he nonetheless understood that his civilized readers followed a different axis of signification. They lived "in the opinion of others,"³⁰ and were victims of their own applause. The modern self had become a heteronomous residue of its reflection in the signs of strangers, themselves constantly in need of public reminders of their own identities. Since "this Age of Reason has stuffed its maxims with disdain for the duties of men and citizens," countervailing maxims were required in order for lawgivers to tame vice by manipulating that public opinion through which fully socialized, deracinated metropolitans received the sentiment of their own existence.³¹ Rousseau became convinced that the "dangerous doctrines" of "Lucretius and . . . Mandeville had more than succeeded,"³² yet his own prescriptions for the maladies of civilization tended to collapse into Mandeville's diagnosis. And while he viewed Mandeville's ideological triumph as a human tragedy, Rousseau's account of its trajectory closely followed *The Fable's* plot.³³ Mandeville, "the most excessive detractor of human virtues,"³⁴ stood as the compelling anti-type of Rousseau's project. For unlike Condillac's or any other contemporary reflection on the subject, only in *The Fable* was the development of language inextricably bound to the process of socialization and to the most dissonant moral registers of modernity. Moreover, Rousseau found a means of confronting modernity on its own ground in

29. *E.O.L.*, pp. 33-35; *Social Contract*, Book 4, ch. 2.

30. *Second Discourse*, pp. 179.

31. *Narcisse, ou L'amant de lui-même*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), Preface, pp. 966 and 972, and *Second Discourse*, p. 179. See, too, Charles E. Ellison, "Rousseau and the Modern City: The Politics of Speech and Dress," *Political Theory*, 13, 4 (Nov., 1985): 497-534.

32. *Narcisse*, Preface, p. 966.

33. As Adam Smith was quick to note. See "Letter to the *Edinburgh Review*," W.P.D. Wightman and J.C. Bryce, eds., *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Oxford: University Press, 1980), pp. 250-254.

34. *Second Discourse*, p. 130.

Mandeville's deconstruction of civilization's manipulative duplicities. He not only discovered in Mandeville the exemplary defense of licentiousness in the most advanced societies, but employed *The Fable's* naturalistic hypotheses as a way to sustain his own anti-modernism. In *The Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, the text which first brought him public acclaim, Rousseau voiced republican outrage at peoples who had lost their simplicity and so spoke in the strange, elegant language "of the rhetoricians who govern you."³⁵ Mandeville's model for understanding the rhetoric of modernity then offered him both an ideological target and a method of conjecture for the recovery of a pure, pre-discursive human condition.

Rousseau's longing for a return to an imagined utopia of communicative immediacy prompted him to adopt the strategies of his chosen adversary, and so brought into full relief Mandeville's argument that the tropes of civilized discourse comprised a rhetoric of dominion. "There reigns in the world," Rousseau wrote, while apologizing for his own rhetorical success,

a multitude of little maxims which reduce simple minds by their false air of philosophy This is one of them: 'Men have all the same passions; above all self-liking (*amour propre*) and interest leads them; in this they are all alike' In Europe, government, laws, costumes, interest all are part of . . . the necessity of mutually deceiving without end; everything makes them need vice; it is necessary for them to become wicked in order to be sages³⁶

No more succinct description of the wants and powers of "the rich man," or of Mandeville's thesis, could easily be given. Nor would Mandeville have to depart from what Rousseau called "cold and subtle style" in order to agree with Rousseau that "the good man is he who has no need to deceive anyone, and [only] the savage is that man."³⁷ For as Rousseau continued to reflect upon the imperatives of civilization, it increasingly seemed to him that no more than a few remote Corsicans and Swiss, supposedly unsullied by the maxims of modernity, and perhaps some rare souls like himself, could hope to speak in the transparent discourse of unalienated practical reason.

35. *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (New York: St. Martin's, 1964), Roger D. Masters, trans., p. 45.

36. *Narcisse*, Preface, p. 969n.

37. *Second Discourse*, p. 130; *Narcisse*, Preface, p. 970n.

This characteristic thought of Rousseau's not only highlights the problems Mandeville injected into his politics. It serves further to intensify the shadow cast by Mandeville on what Rousseau regarded as the prison of language, formed by a history from which he struggled but failed to escape.

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