“Les mots même se font chair”¹: Rousseau’s materialist theory of linguistic embodiment

Guided by the writings of Monique Wittig, my dissertation proposes a new reading of the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It starts by contextualising Wittig’s understudied development of Rousseau’s notion of the social contract against two backdrops: first, disputes within the French women’s liberation movement about the political meaning of sexuality at the end of the 1970s; and second, the materialist-feminist critiques of the social and human sciences articulated in France around the same time. Placing Wittig in these contexts allows the dissertation to stage a debate between her understanding of Rousseau and that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who had famously invoked him as the founder of the human sciences. Lévi-Strauss draws on Rousseau in his survey of the boundary between nature and culture, leveraging his thought both to depict the latter as a product of the former and to fashion the concept of the exchange of women (the foundation of culture). Countering Lévi-Strauss, Wittig employs Rousseau’s work to denaturalise everything: to see all social categories, especially sex, as conventional, political, therefore subject to change.

Through this hermeneutic triangulation, I argue that Wittig’s appropriation of Rousseau reveals hitherto neglected aspects of his work. The central claim is that for Rousseau, the traits of the body – especially sexual difference – are not natural, but social: constructed in part through the material impact of language on the body. In this, I join the minority of scholars who view Rousseau as in some way a social constructionist, against the traditional understanding that he roots his thought in natural sexual differences and gender roles. My dissertation goes further, however, by depicting him as a linguistic constructionist, a reading inspired by parallels between Rousseau’s texts and Wittig’s materialist account of language.

On the basis of this reading, the dissertation advances several other claims about Rousseau’s thought. The body results from a social, linguistic construction, and this construction impinges on the soul’s capacity for moral discernment (for “hearing” the “voice of conscience”) – imperilling the critical cliche of Rousseau as a staunch dualist. Moreover, this construction is not a onetime event, but a fragile and ongoing process constantly influenced by the matter of language in speech and writing, in other words: by culture; therefore, culture, sexual difference and language are paramount to Rousseau’s politics (a widely-shared, but to my mind misunderstood, view). Finally, by connecting sexual difference to Rousseau’s engagement with the theoretical problems posed by materialism, the dissertation contributes the re-evaluation of his relationship to the philosophes, suggesting that his engagement with their work was deeper and more sustained than sometimes argued.

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¹ Monique Wittig, Virgile, non (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 23.
Selected bibliography

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