really a fault. I had long since observed that her affection for me was
due to something . . . .
I was conscious again of an unpleasantness, the effects of which I had formerly
felt when with mamma; and the effect was the same with Thérèse. Let us not
look for perfections which are not to be found in nature; it would be the same
with any other woman whatsoever. . . . My situation, however, was at that
time the same, and even aggravated by the animosity of my enemies, who
only sought to find me at fault. I was afraid of a repetition; and, not desiring to run
the risk of it, I preferred to condemn myself to strict continence, than to expose
Thérèse to the risk of finding herself in the same condition again. Besides,
I had observed that intercourse with women distinctly aggravated my ill-health.
. . . These two reasons combined caused me to form resolutions which I had
sometimes been very inconsistent in keeping, but in which I had persevered
with greater firmness for the last three or four years (p. 595) [pp. 616–617].

In the Manuscrit de Paris, after “distinctly aggravated my ill-health!” we
read: “the corresponding vice, of which I have never been able to cure
myself completely, appeared to me to produce less injurious results. These
two reasons combined . . .”

This perversity consists of preferring the sign and protects me from
mortal expenditure. To be sure. But this apparently egotistical economy
also functions within an entire system of moral representation. Egotism is
redeemed by a culpability, which determines auto-eroticism as a fatal
waste and a wound of the self by the self. But as I thus harm only
myself, this perversity is not truly condemnable. Rousseau explains it in
more than one letter. Thus: “With that exception and [the exception of] vices
that have always done harm to me alone, I can expose to all eyes a life
irreplaceable in all the secrets of my heart” (to M. de Saint-Germain, 2–26–70). “I have
great vices, but they have never harmed anyone but me” (to M. Le Noir, 1–15–72).

Jean-Jacques could thus look for a supplement to Thérèse only on one
condition: that the system of supplementarity in general be already open
in its possibility, that the play of substitutions be already operative for a
long time and that in a certain way Thérèse herself be already a supple-
ment. As Mamma was already the supplement of an unknown mother, and
as the “true mother” herself, at whom the known “psychoanalysis” of the
case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau stops, was also in a certain way a supplement,
from the first trace, and even if she had not “truly” died in giving birth.
Here is the chain of supplements. The name Mamma already designates one:

Ah, my Thérèse! I am only too happy to possess you, modest and healthy,
and not to find what I never looked for. [The question of “maidenhood” (puerperal)
which Thérèse has just confessed to have lost in innocence and by accident.] At first I had only sought amusement; I now saw that I had found
more and gained a companion. A little intimacy with this excellent girl, a little

pleasures, I had done much to promote my happiness. To supply the place of
my extinguished ambition, I needed a lively sentiment which should take
complete possession of [literally “fill” — remplir] my heart. In a word, I needed
a successor to mamma. As I should never live with her again, I wanted some-
one to live with her pupil, in whom I might find the simplicity and docility of
heart which she had found in me. I felt it necessary that the gentle tranquility
of private and domestic life should make up to me for the loss of the brilliant
career which I was renouncing. When I was quite alone, I felt a void in my
heart, which it only needed another heart to fill. Destiny had deprived me of, or,
at least in part, alienated me from, that heart for which Nature had formed me.
From that moment I was alone; for with me it has always been everything or
nothing. I found in Thérèse the substitute [supplément] that I needed. 11

Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that
of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations
that produce the sense of the very thing they de-serve: the mirage of the
thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception. Immediate is
derived. That all begins through the intermediary is what is indeed “in-
conceivable [to reason].”

The Exorbitant, Question of Method

“For me there has never been an intermediary between everything or
nothing.” The intermediary is the mid-point and the mediation, the middle
term between total absence and the absolute plenitude of presence. It is
clear that mediacy is the name of all that Rousseau wanted opinionately to
efface. This wish is expressed in a deliberate, sharp, thematic way. It does
not have to be deciphered. Jean-Jacques recalls it here at the very moment
when he is spelling out the supplements that are linked together to replace
a mother or a Nature. And here the supplement occupies the middle point
between total absence and total presence. The play of substitution fills and
marks a determined lack. But Rousseau argues as if the recourse to the
supplement—here to Thérèse—was going to appease his impatience when
confronted with the intermediary: “From that moment I was alone; for me there
has never been an intermediary between everything and nothing. I
found in Thérèse the substitute that I needed.” The virulence of this
concept is thus appealed, as if one were able to arrest it, domesticate it,
tame it.

This brings up the question of the usage of the word “supplement”: of
Rousseau’s situation within the language and the logic that assures to this
word or this concept sufficiently surprising resources so that the presumed
subject of the sentence might always say, through using the “supplement,”

more, less, or something other than what he would mean [vous dirait dire]. This question is therefore not only of Rousseau's writing but also of our reading. We should begin by taking rigorous account of this being held within [prise] or this surprise: the writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should produce.

What does produce mean here? In my attempt to explain that, I would initiate a justification of my principles of reading. A justification, as we shall see, entirely negative, outlining by exclusion a space of reading that I shall not fill here: a task of reading.

To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language. This moment of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only protected, it has never opened, a reading.

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendentally signified. There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; il n'y a pas de hors-texte]. And that is neither because Jean-Jacques' life, or the existence of Mamma or Thérèse themselves, is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have access to their so-called "real" existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation. All reasons of this type would already be sufficient, to be sure, but there are more radical reasons. What we have tried to show by following

the guiding line of the "dangerous supplement," is that in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone," beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from, a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like "real mother" name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.

Although it is not commentary, our reading must be intrinsic and remain within the text. That is why, in spite of certain appearances, the locating of the word supplement is here not at all psychoanalytical, if by that we understand an interpretation that takes us outside of the writing toward a psychobiographical signified, or even toward a general psychological structure that could rightly be separated from the signifier. This method has occasionally been opposed to the traditional doubling commentary; it could be shown that it actually comes to terms with it quite easily. The security with which the commentary considers the self-identity of the text, the confidence with which it carves out its contour, goes hand in hand with the tranquil assurance that leaps over the text toward its presumed content, in the direction of the pure signified. And in effect, in Rousseau's case, psychoanalytical studies like those of Dr. Laforgue transgress the text only after having read it according to the most current methods. The reading of the literary "symptom" is most banal, most academic, most naive. And once one has thus blinded oneself to the very tissue of the "symptom," to its proper texture, one cheerfully exceeds it toward a psychobiographical signified whose link with the literary signifier then becomes perfectly extrinsic and contingent. One recognizes the other aspect of the same gesture when, in general works on Rousseau, in a package of classical shape that gives itself out to be a synthesis that faithfully restores, through commentary and compilation of themes, the totality of the work and the thought, one encounters a chapter of biographical and psychoanalytical cast on the "problem of sexuality in Rousseau," with a reference in an Appendix to the author's medical case-history.

If it seems to us in principle impossible to separate, through interpretation or commentary, the signified from the signifier, and thus to destroy writing by the writing that is yet reading, we nevertheless believe that this impossibility is historically articulated. It does not limit attempts at deciphering in the same way, to the same degree, and according to the same rules. Here we must take into account the history of the text in general. When we speak of the writer and of the encompassing power of the lan-
analytic theory, even if we do not master it and even if we are assured of never being able to master it perfectly.

But it is for another reason that this is not even a somewhat inarticulate psychoanalysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Such a psychoanalysis is already obliged to have located all the structures of appurtenance within Rousseau's text, all that is not unique to it by reason of the encompassing power and the already-thwarted of the language or of the culture—all that could be inhabited rather than produced by writing. Around the irreducible point of originality of this writing an immense series of structures, of historical totalities of all orders, are organized, enveloped, and blended. Supposing that psychoanalysis can by rights succeed in outlining them and their interpretations, supposing that it takes into account the entire history of metaphysics—the history of that Western metaphysics that entertains relationships of cohabitation with Rousseau's text, it would still be necessary for this psychoanalysis to elucidate the law of its own appurtenance to metaphysics and Western culture. Let us not pursue this any further. We have already measured the difficulty of the task and the element of frustration in our interpretation of the supplement. We are sure that something irreducibly Rousseauist is captured there but we have carried off, at the same time, a yet quite unformed mass of roots, soil, and sediments of all sorts.

2. Even supposing that Rousseau's text can be rigorously isolated and articulated within history in general, and then within the history of the sign "supplement," one must still take into consideration many other possibilities. Following the appearances of the word "supplement" and of the corresponding concept or concepts, we traverse a certain path within Rousseau's text. To be sure, this particular path will assure us the economy of a synopsis. But are other paths not possible? And as long as the totality of paths is not effectively exhausted, how shall we justify this one?

3. In Rousseau's text, after having indicated—by anticipation and as a prelude—the function of the sign "supplement," I now prepare myself to give special privilege, in a manner that some might consider exorbitant, to certain texts like the Essay on the Origin of Languages and other fragments on the theory of language and writing. By what right? And why these short texts, published for the most part after the author's death, difficult to classify, of uncertain date and inspiration?

To all these questions and within the logic of their system, there is no satisfying response. In a certain measure and in spite of the theoretical precautions that I formulate, my choice is in fact exorbitant.

But what is the exorbitant?

I wished to reach the point of a certain extremity in relation to the totality of the age of logocentrism. Starting from this point of extremity,
a certain deconstruction of that totality which is also a traced path, of that orb (orbis) which is also orbitary (orbita), might be broached. The first gesture of this departure and this deconstruction, although subject to a certain historical necessity, cannot be given methodological or logical intra- orbitary assurances. Within the closure, one can only judge its style in terms of the accepted oppositions. It may be said that this style is empiricist and in a certain way that would be correct. The departure is radically empiricist. It proceeds like a wandering thought on the possibility of itinerary and of method. It is affected by nonknowledge as by its future and it ventures out deliberately. I have myself defined the form and the vulnerability of this empiricism. But here the very concept of empiricism destroys itself. To exceed the metaphysical orb is an attempt to get out of the orbit (orbita), to think the entirety of the classical conceptual oppositions, particularly the one within which the value of empiricism is held: the opposition of philosophy and nonphilosophy, another name for empiricism, for this incapability to sustain on one's own and to the limit the coherence of one's own discourse, for being produced as truth at the moment when the value of truth is shattered, for escaping the internal contradictions of skepticism, etc. The thought of this historical opposition between philosophy and empiricism is not simply empirical and it cannot be thus qualified without abuse and misunderstanding.

Let us make the diagram more specific. What is exorbitant in the reading of Rousseau? No doubt Rousseau, as I have already suggested, has only a very relative privilege in the history that interests us. If we merely wished to situate him within this history, the attention that we accord him would be clearly disproportionate. But that is not our intention. We wish to identify a decisive articulation of the logocentric epoch. For purposes of this identification Rousseau seems to us to be most revealing. That obviously supposes that we have already prepared the exit, determined the repression of writing as the fundamental operation of the epoch, read a certain number of texts but not all of them, a certain number of Rousseau's texts but not all of them. This avowal of empiricism can sustain itself only by the strength of the question. The opening of the question, the departure from the closure of a self-evidence, the putting into doubt of a system of oppositions, all these movements necessarily have the form of empiricism and of errancy. At any rate, they cannot be described, as to past norms, except in this form. No other trace is available, and as these various questions are not absolute beginnings in every way, they allow themselves to be effectively reached, on one entire surface, by this description which is also a criticism. We must begin wherever we are and the thought of the trace, which cannot not take the scenic into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. Wherever we are: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.

"... That Dangerous Supplement ..."

Let us narrow the arguments down further. In certain respects, the theme of supplementarity is certainly no more than one theme among others. It is in a chain, carried by it. Perhaps one could substitute something else for it. But it happens that this theme describes the chain itself, the being-chain of a textual chain, the structure of substitution, the articulation of desire and of language, the logic of all conceptual oppositions taken over by Rousseau, and particularly the role and the function, in his system, of the concept of Nature. It tells us in a text what a text is, it tells us in writing what writing it, in Rousseau's writing it tells us Jean-Jacques's desire, etc. If we consider, according to the axial proposition of this essay, that there is nothing outside the text, our ultimate justification would be the following: the concept of the supplement and the theory of writing designate textuality itself in Rousseau's text in an indefinitely multiplied structure—en abyme [in an abyss]—to employ the current phrase. And we shall see that this abyss is not a happy or unhappy accident. An entire theory of the structural necessity of the abyss will be gradually constituted in our reading; the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already infiltrated presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and the splitting of the self. Representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation, etc. The supplement itself is quite exorbitant, in every sense of the word.

Thus Rousseau inscribes textuality in the text. But its operation is not simple. It tricks with a gesture of effacement, and strategic relations like the relationships of force among the two movements form a complex design. This design seems to us to be represented in the handling of the concept of the supplement. Rousseau cannot utilize it at the same time in all the virtualities of its meaning. The way in which he determines the concept and, in so doing, lets himself be determined by that very thing that he excludes from it, the direction in which he bends it, here as addition, there as substitute, now as the positivity and exteriority of evil, now as a happy auxiliary, all this conveys neither a passivity nor an activity, neither an unconsciousness nor a lucidity on the part of the author. Reading should not only abandon these categories—which are also, let us recall, in passing, the founding categories of metaphysics—but should produce the law of this relationship to the concept of the supplement. It is certainly a production, because I do not simply duplicate what Rousseau thought of this relationship. The concept of the supplement is a sort of blind spot in Rousseau's text, the not-seen that opens and limits visibility. But the production, if it attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight, does not leave the text. It has moreover only believed it was doing so by illusion. It is contained in the transformation of the language it
designates, in the regulated exchanges between Rousseau and history. We know that these exchanges only take place by way of the language and the text, in the infrastructural sense that we now give to that word. And what we call production is necessarily a text, the system of a writing and of a reading which we know is ordered around its own blind spot. We know this a priori, but only now and with a knowledge that is not a knowledge at all.

3

Genesis
and Structure of the
Essay on the Origin
of Languages

I. The Place of
the "Essay"

What about the voice within the logic of the supplement? within that which should perhaps be called the "graphic" of the supplement? Within the chain of supplements, it was difficult to separate writing from onanism. Those two supplements have in common at least the fact that they are dangerous. They transgress a prohibition and are experienced within culpability. But, by the economy of difference, they confirm the interdict they transgress, get around a danger, and reserve an expenditure. In spite of them but also thanks to them, we are authorized to see the sun, to deserve the light that keeps us on the surface of the mine.

What culpability attaches to these two experiences? What fundamental culpability is found fixed or deflected there? These questions may be elaborated in their proper place only if we first describe the structural and "phenomenological" superficies of these two experiences, especially the area they have in common.

In both cases, the possibility of auto-affectation manifests itself as such: it leaves a trace of itself in the world. The worldly residence of a signifier becomes impregnable. That which is written remains, and the experience of touching-touched admits the world as a third party. The exteriority of space is irrefutable there. Within the general structure of auto-affectation, within the giving oneself a presence or a pleasure, the operation of touching-touched receives the other within the narrow gulf that separates doing from suffering. And the outside, the exposed surface of the body, signifies and marks forever the division that shapes auto-affectation.

Auto-affectation is a universal structure of experience. All living things are capable of auto-affectation. And only a being capable of symbolizing, that is to say of auto-affecting, may let itself be affected by the other in general. Auto-affectation is the condition of an experience in general. This possibility—another name for "life"—is a general structure articulated by the history of life, and leading to complex and hierarchical operations. Auto-affectation,