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> "*Increscunt animi, virescit volnere virtus*" (Spirits grow, strength strengthens by vulnerability)—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*[1]

Two origins sit in opposition—that of language in civilizing cooperation and that of violence in animal brutality.[2] Human–nonhuman duality is disposed this way all the time, if just as often deconstructed. One particular scene, an abstraction, captures the dialectical tension coiled up in the language–violence binary[3]: An animal begins to speak, using symbols rather than violence to work with and against other animals of its kind for survival in a tough world. Rational and temporal assumptions are knotted up here. The rational assumption is that the speaking animal chooses language over tooth and claw. In retrospect, the choice can be reasoned both practically and morally. Symbolic cooperation enables this creature to thrive where its bodily weapons would not, and symbolic means are virtuous too because they avoid unnecessary pain and death. The temporal assumption is that bloodshed pre-dates symbol use. Creature had long turned against creature, using whatever means necessary to survive, until this one beast invented language as a non-violent way to exert power. The apocryphal scene posits what commonly stands as fact—language supersedes violence. Moreover, it locates the birth of the human in the moment when a certain animal invented itself as more-than-animal. The significance of language is encapsulated in a hypothetical memory of humanity outwitting violence. Language as the definitive human capacity is fundamental to rhetoric's self-image and, more important, to ontological assumptions about what rhetoric is and does.

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The sequencing and conditions of this scene are worth inspecting. Although language is placed logically after violence, the supposed rational utility of symbols raises questions about the seemingly un-generated, prior existence of violence. If this creature could reason the value of language, it could reason the value of violence. In fact, human beings choose violence over language all the time. Presumably, violence itself developed from some starting point, so shouldn't we surmise its beginnings too? Or was it always "just there"? If, after scrutinizing the origin of violence, the dialectical emergence of language loses coherence, then we are faced with questions about the conditions of possibility for rhetoric. I argue, by way of Nietzsche's "On the Origin of Language," that language and violence are expressions of the *negative*.[4] In this terse little essay he presents and dispatches common rational and temporal explanations for the beginning of language, settling on the negative as its real condition of origin. He does not define the negative but I use it broadly as *not*-that, including senses of difference, refusal, absence, antithesis, or elimination. Extending Nietzsche's thinking to violence, one cannot preserve a dialectical explanation for the birth of language against violence, and with that loss rhetoric's ontological footing becomes insecure. Which raises the question, where does the negative come from?

Games of origins are never satisfying because the emergence of something always requires something else. In *Timaeus*, Plato writes of Creation's origins, setting eternal archetypes (Forms) before created things, but even God who models things from archetypes depends on the pre-existence of elemental substances and an imperceptible, immaterial space of creation (the *chora*). And don't blaspheme by asking where archetypes come from![5] Origins always have antecedents. Nevertheless, examining untidy beginnings can teach us about ontological assumptions, as examining the opposed origins of violence and language does about rhetoric. Against the transcendence supposed in the apocryphal scene of the First Words, where language lifts us from the animal, I am following the origins downward, seeking an ontological rupture beneath the dialectic of language and violence where their mutual, material conditions become clearer. The transcendence I seek reaches lower, not higher.[6] In a story variously attributed to Bertrand Russell, or William James, or Winston Churchill (to say nothing of Indian folklore), a sage man explaining the order of the cosmos is informed by an old woman that the world rests on the back of a turtle. The sage wryly asks, "But what does the turtle stand on?" The woman replies, "It's turtles all the way down." We already seem to have gone down quite a few turtles by thinking about origins. Eventually, I want to go down one more, but given space limitations, I focus here on the turtle located just above the one I hope to address in future work.

Your Momma is Negative

The first task is to problematize the temporal and rational assumptions of our apocryphal scene. I will start where this argument ends: violence and language are both grounded in negation. We arrive at this conclusion once it is impossible to

explain how language could come into existence any differently than violence could do. Nietzsche's general thesis is that "*Language is neither the conscious work of individuals nor of a plurality*. . . . Language is much too complex to be the work of a single individual, much too unified to be the work of a mass; it is a complete organism." Rather than assume that violence precedes and is opposed to language, I ask the questions about violence that Nietzsche asks of language, following a simple procedure of substituting the word "violence" for "language" in Nietzsche's text. So, then, what if "[Violence] *is neither the conscious work of individuals nor of a plurality*"? If, "[Violence] is much too complex to be the work of a single individual, much too unified to be the work of a mass; [if] it is a complete organism"?[7] Violence as an organism seems plausible given its lifelike persistence; it is as natural to the earth as the soil and the sun, yet dependent on context to survive. Violence *qua* violence was not created by one creature or by one species and operates with an unthinking will of its own, exceeding the moments when it erupts. Treating violence as Nietzsche treats language suggests that neither violence *nor* language is an invented agency of the animal world. To quote from Friedrich Schelling, they are things in themselves, "originating blindly and yet we cannot deny the unfathomable intentionality of their formation down to every detail."[8]

However, since we are operating under a principle of differential symmetry rather than dialectical asymmetry, we cannot accept that violence is indeed instinctual and ahistorical, any more than Nietzsche could accept that language exceeds instinct and is only historical. If we pause before accepting brutality's blind origins and apply his case for language as an organism to violence, we can see better why the negative is the shared ontological condition of both. It is impossible to problematize the origins of language while conveniently preserving violence as its constitutive exclusion.

The first argument in favor of language as a willed invention that Nietzsche critiques is that language is a product of consensus—from squeaks and grunts to sonnets and genres. He notes that this narrative supposes both a uniformity of symbolic skill sufficient for consensus to form about language itself *and* a common survival motive for conventionalized symbol use. The presumed grand value of language, consensus, is also presumed as the cause of its emergence; "The new language was felt to be advantageous and so it was retained."[9] The new language presupposes a language before, a consensus to create consensus as it were, which relinquishes the problem of explaining how language first emerged in the very moment of trying to address that problem.

What, then, of violence as a product of consensus—from sticks and stones to bombs and drones? If violence is a collectively shared, evolving phenomenon, then perhaps it also derived from a consensual moment, some occasion when violence was commonly adopted as means to ends. However, the same logical trouble that undermines developmental explanations for the origin of language spells trouble here. To understand violence as a product of consensus would also suppose both a uniformity of barbarous skill sufficient to coordinate our violence *and* a survival motive for that conventionalized mayhem. The presumed grand value of violence, destruction, is presumed as the cause of *its* emergence, too. "The new [violence] was

felt to be advantageous and so it was retained."[10] Just as we need language to think about language, we need violence to think about violence. New forms of violence arise because the world is always already violent.

All right, then: if consensus as an explanation only pushes origination into infinite regress, what of genius—of God or some superhuman—as the inventor of language? This explanation "presupposes a language prior to language" as well. Who or what taught God or God-like people how to speak? Once more, the moment of emergence is simply deferred. Similarly, to understand violence as the spawn of wicked genius "presupposes a [violence] prior to [violence]."[11] Who or what taught God or this superhuman to kill? I am reminded of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Moon-Watcher, a prehistoric man, after interacting with a monolith left by aliens, gets the bright idea to use a stone as a bludgeon. Fast forward to space flight.[12] Clarke's parable of the First Tool suggests that *homo rhetoricus* is a descendant of *homo faber*, but as Nietzsche shows, once we instrumentalize language we are left with the problem of the toolmaker's knowledge of the tool. The same problem therefore attends explanations of the maker of violence-as-tool. Where did that knowledge come from, the stars?

When holding up rhetoric as the *sine qua non* of the speaking animal, the origin of violence is not something we tend to think about. Its mere existence, older than language, natural to the world, is all that is required for it to be the foil to language and thus to rhetoric. However, if one adopts Nietzsche's criticism of logics of origination and understands language and violence as equally inexplicable by way of a developmental (*physei*) or miraculous (*thesei*) birth, then one faces difficult questions about practical or moral differences between kinds of force. Both violence and language are apparently ever-present, essential to the world; this makes it hard to place one as the superior term in the binary *by virtue of its origination*. There can be no *essential* defense of language over violence if one relies on origin stories to define that essence, because those origins' relation cannot be firmly established. It follows, then, that assuming humanity's origin to be synonymous with that of language is equally difficult. Contra Aristotle,[13] if violence and language cannot be discriminated by their original natures, and if language is a more advanced tool than violence, then why isn't the birth sign of humanity simply smarter violence, as Clarke insinuates?

Given that no record of the first instance of language or violence exists, temporal and practico-moral hypotheticals cannot provide a coherent origin story of language *or* violence, let alone of language *after* violence, and hence cannot provide a coherent *originary* rationale for the human ontology of rhetoric. Nietzsche rejects explanations of language as a tool made by or given to humanity; he animalizes language as instinctual, by which he means "purposeful without a consciousness."[14] We can see violence as an instinct similarly in need of an origin but equally inscrutable. Thus, we should suspend the idea of violence as first nature and language as second nature. We cannot suppose that violence always stands behind language in a "more" natural state. The origins of both simply recede, tussled together, into a vanishing point.

Rather than wander aimlessly in the mists of time, Nietzsche asserts a different basis for origins that is not concerned with sequences or first choices. Without

elaboration, he makes the startling claim: "in actual fact the mother of language is negation."[15] Negation gives to action purpose but not intent, which is the precondition for language. One could turn to philosophy of language to flesh out Nietzsche's statement and demonstrate the utter dependence of signs on the negative, tapping someone like Saussure for assistance,[16] but it is simpler to build a case from within Nietzsche's essay. The supposition of language as "always already" before language is the productive negation necessary for language to exist in the first place. Composition and hermeneutics require us to imagine, in palimpsestic fashion, a language prior to language. With almost a wave of his hand, Nietzsche transforms the negative from a phenomenon intrinsic to language into language's extrinsic condition for being. The negative begins outside, not inside, language. Unlike Burke, who saw no "No" in nature, Nietzsche argues that "No" is the only nature that can support language.[17] One reason might be that the "always already" depends on the negation apparent in parsing "before" from "after," when an old language is followed by a new one. Also, the "always already" logic requires a rejection of one for the other, which is the negation incumbent to selection.[18] Even though the apocryphal scene fails on its own terms, it succeeds by showing us a firmer ontological origin of language: the negative as embodied in distinctions between now versus then, this versus that.

One might think, "Whew! Now we have a basis for a history of rhetoric, driven by a dialectical relationship between language and violence, that sets humans apart." If we give up on positing First Words, the nature of negation alone allows for language, and the cultivation of that nature makes humans the "symbol-using animal." *Homo rhetoricus* is master of the negative. Indeed, in "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," Nietzsche saw the "drive to form metaphors" as the distinguishing genius of humans, the means of successful cooperation that enables not only our survival, but also our artful creation of self.[19] Yet, by naturalizing language as a child of the negative, he leaves open the possibility of siblings such as violence. Because the negative is external, not internal, to language, then language cannot retroactively claim the negative wholly for itself. The child is not self-identical with the mother. Thus one can easily claim that, "the mother of [violence] is negation." Again, philosophies of violence could flesh out this idea, such as Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" where he argues indirectly that violence is essentially negation as prohibition, coercion, or destruction, and frankly mixtures of all of them.[20] Yet Nietzsche's reasoning is enough. Like language, violence is palimpsestic, predicated on previous violence all the way back to the first violence, whenever that was. Both war making and peace seeking require us to imagine violence as always already violent. A new violence depends on the negation of an earlier violence. The condition for separating not just language from violence, but one language from another, one violence from another, is the same condition that allows for language and violence to exist. Both express the negative.

Now one can back away from the whirring dialectic of violence and language to recognize the foundation of maybe the most common observation about a language-violence binary: that language is itself violent. This makes good sense if we see them both simply as the capacity for negation put to use. Dialectically, language and

violence meet in negation, only to separate and start over, constantly displacing each other as they jostle around their conjunctions in nature and culture, the human and nonhuman. The binary turns itself inside out time and again while moving toward a transcendent rupture, as if language could escape the animality it shares with violence, but this never happens. Instead, the dialectic pauses before rupture and falls back to analogic likenesses of violence and language, as Foucault does here: "We must conceive discourse as a violence that we do to things, or, at all events, as a practice we impose upon them; it is in this practice that the events of discourse find their regularity."[21] Language is a violent *habitus*.[22] Where Nietzsche argued, "All conscious thought is possible only with the help of language," one could just as well say, "thought is possible only with the help of [violence]."[23] Or, more broadly, thought is possible only by virtue of the negative.

The challenge to rhetoric's self-image as the flowering of humans' distinctive symbolic ability is that humanity derives from the negations enabling both language *and* violence, just as language *and* violence also derive from humanity's inclination for the negative. We might then re-read the moments comparing symbol-use and savagery that fill the history of rhetorical theory, from Gorgias's "Encomium" and Isocrates's "Antidosis" to Burke's discussion of the Kill in his *Rhetoric*, all of which refract negation into violence and language and some of which complicate the presumed pre-existence of violence.[24]

About that Other Turtle

Thus far I have described a dialectic that perambulates the back of a turtle called "Negation." I have not yet broken away from the relations between violence and language, only made those relations indistinct. The break begins when one asks, "What makes negation possible"? The infinite regression of language prior to language and violence prior to violence certainly sounds like the fable of the turtles, except that these regressions never actually leave the plateau of "Negation." Nietzsche's assertion about the real origin of language implicates another condition of possibility underneath the regressive origin games played out between violence and language.

So what does the negative stand on? If we can answer that, we will have spotted the next turtle. One answer might be the positive, which in this context means a materiality of which traces, cuts, distinctions, and endings are as yet absent but destined to appear. The unwritten presupposes the scribbles that will cover it; the untouched presupposes the bruises that will mark it. We would be looking for the *No*'s space of *non*-being that awaits *No*'s arrival, effectively an un-inscribed space whose metonym is the blank page. But how does the negative derive from this un-negated positivity? Actually, it doesn't. An unblemished state before negation is only another aspect of the No, namely its self-negation. The very concept of an unmarked positivity is the negative of the negative: differences smoothed out so marking can begin again. The blank page is *produced* by erasure. If you take the positive as the condition of the negative, you are still chasing opposites on the back of

"Negation," only to find the murmur behind language (and, I think, the trauma behind violence). The negative produces the positive by doubling back on itself, hiding itself in the turn.

The relation between negation and its condition of possibility is not dialectical. By letting go of the language-violence binary and embracing rhetoric's materiality, we can better ascertain the ontological conditions of the negative. For negation to exist, there must be receptiveness to negation, material capacities able to respond to and participate in marking, and to register a long chain of marks such that memory is possible. The capacity to impose derives from the capacity to be affected. The responsive vulnerabilities of things ironically grant the power of imposition. Diane Davis argues that the rhetorical *is* the ability to feel and the compulsion to respond to that which affects us.[25] Burke's observation on human responsiveness to mystery is a case in point: "The intensities, morbidities, or particularities of mystery come from institutional sources, but the *aptitude* comes from the nature of man, generically, as a *symbol-using animal*."[26]

However, we should also explore the responsiveness of materialities beyond the human. Without the vulnerabilities of those things that enable negation to "stick" and to "flow" (wood's spongy quality that makes paper possible, or threads of glass conducting data-filled lightwaves, for instance), there is insufficient capacity for rhetoric. Sensitivities beyond the symbolic that are vital to rhetorical action are plentiful; things need not perceive negations as symbols in order to participate in rhetoric. Hence, material vulnerability, not just preconscious sensitivity to symbols, is the mother of the negative, and so the turtle called "Vulnerability" provides for the negative by hosting a tangle of affective relations between human and nonhuman entities, and not only between cognitive agents.[27] This teeming multiplicity of mutually affecting things is not prior to the negative in a historical sense, but it is *necessary*. Familiar differences between humans, animals, machines, and their hybrids re-emerge when we give our attention back to "Negation."[28]

My words are running out, so as concisely as possible: if the symbolic depends on the negative, the ontology of rhetoric is grounded in the capacity for negation, and thus the ontology of rhetoric is decidedly more-than-human. Against an essentialized understanding of rhetoric as the refinement of humanity's unique ontology, I highlighted an infinite regression of negation in the scene of the First Words, confounding the idea that the birth of language defines humans as transcending violence. I also spied a different kind of regression sitting crosswise to the receding horizon of the negative. In this materially immanent regression the negative's conditions of possibility exist at one and the same time and place as negation, not "before" it. Negation is not an invention of human consensus or genius, but a product of affective relations between all manners of things. This other line of regression, of immanent material conditions, is also "turtles all the way down" because other plateaus no doubt co-exist with and are necessary for "Vulnerability" and "Negation." However, to further establish rhetoric's immanent, necessary conditions of possibility will require a fuller engagement with rhetorical theory's investment in symbol-use as human agency, a stronger explanation of vulnerability's

relation to language/violence, and a way to understand vulnerability as power rather than weakness. But this will have to wait.

Notes

[1] Thanks to Megan Foley for alerting me to this motto.
[2] Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz, & intro. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 278, 289.
[3] This seemingly ahistorical use of "language" is itself historical, reflecting a broad contemporary usage of "language" to refer to signifying forms of many stripes. It is purposely unstable, as the dialectic with violence makes clear.
[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Origin of Language," in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. & trans. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, David J. Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 209–11.
[5] Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Amazon Digital Services), Section 1, Kindle edition. My thanks to Diane Keeling for pointing me to *Timaeus*.
[6] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 256–58.
[7] Nietzsche, "Origin," 209, original emphases.
[8] As quoted in Nietzsche, "Origin," 211.
[9] Nietzsche, "Origin," 210.
[10] Nietzsche, "Origin," 210.
[11] Nietzsche, "Origin," 210.
[12] Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (New York: ROC, 1999), 3–23.
[13] Aristotle, *Politics: A Treatise on Government*, trans. William Ellis (Mobile Reference, 2010), Book I, Chapter 2.
[14] Nietzsche, "Origin," 211.
[15] Nietzsche, "Origin," 211.
[16] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 117.
[17] Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 9.
[18] Burke, *Language*, 44–45.
[19] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. & trans. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, David J. Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 254.
[20] Benjamin, *Reflections*, 277–89.
[21] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 229.
[22] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 54–55.
[23] Nietzsche, "Origin," 209.
[24] Gorgias, "Encomium of Helen," in *The Older Sophists*, trans. George Kennedy, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 50–54; Isocrates, "Antidosis," trans. George Norlin, Perseus Digital Library, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0144:speech=15; Burke, *Rhetoric*, 3–17, 252–67.
[25] Diane Davis, *Inessential Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).
[26] Burke, *Rhetoric*, 279, original emphasis.

[27] Nathan Stormer, "Encomium of Helen's Body: A Will to Matter," in Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites, ed., *Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 215–27.

[28] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and foreword Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 149–66.