

From the Language of Adam to the Pluralism of Babel

MAURICE OLENDER

The language of Paradise is no longer known. In the tower of Babel, where sounds and sense mingled, God struck Man with a state of forgetfulness for the first words acquired. The unity of a once immediate and translucent language was replaced by confusion from the plurality and opacity of numerous tongues. Was the language spoken in the original Garden that of the orient or occident, south or north, Hebrew or Flemish?

The Hebrews were among the ancient cultures that developed along the coast of the Mediterranean. Though marginal, this culture flourished beyond all expectations and its transmission from century to century was assured by an old collection of archives. Since some of the basic myths of Christian societies originated in the old Hebrew texts – translated into Greek, then into Latin, re-read and re-interpreted by the Church Fathers – this culture of the Orient became, to some extent, that of the Christian Occident. The question of the original language and the plurality of languages occupies a distinct role in Hebrew culture, as it would subsequently in societies nourished by readings from the Bible – in their Jewish, Christian or Muslim versions.

This singularity stems from the strange tale told in *Genesis*: a faceless God with an unutterable Name, creating the Universe in six days, divulging several words in a language that dissipates primeval Chaos. In the beginning, even before the appearance of Adam and Eve, language embodied a crucial deed: the invention of an ordered world.

No sooner was the primordial scene of *Genesis* set up than Adam, Eve and the serpent appeared, conversing with God in a tongue destined to bear the mark of a forgotten language. St Augustine meditated on this original speech; Isidore of Seville also wondered ‘what sort of language’ the Creator used ‘at the beginning of the world, when He said: *Fiat Lux* – Let there be light!’¹

Following the Flood, the renowned episode of that exalted place of all confusions, the Tower of Babel, occurred. It was there that the immediacy

and translucency of the Adamic language was lost; it was there that sounds and sense mingled and clashed, spawning a plurality of tongues opaque to one another.²

This brief evocation of *Genesis* allows us to emphasize the following: the original language necessarily underlies the Biblical theme of the plurality of languages. Questions pertaining to the lost language – the forgotten language³ – inspired theologians before they began to perturb nineteenth-century philologists and linguists – even though the latter rejected the question of the original language as moot and irrelevant.

As a marginal note to my study on *The Languages of Paradise*, I propose this brief historic excursion.⁴ We will traverse several ancient texts, indicating how the impassioned quest for origins, the desire to know and to speak the language of Paradise, gave rise to various forms of nationalism – over the course of the centuries – in Europe. While it is important to recall that drawing attention to ancient ideas in this manner offers no model for the future, the historical perspective can still nourish our reflections on problems and conflicts in today's linguistics, illuminating them in an unexpected manner.

DID ADAM SPEAK FLEMISH OR TUSCAN, DANISH OR FRENCH?

At times, the most humble villager dreams of glorious origins. More than one people – in fact, quite a few nations – have sought to place their own ancestors at the sources of 'civilization', or even at those of humankind. This being the case in cultures inspired by commentaries on the Biblical *Genesis*, how could they refrain from attempting to ascribe Adamic origins to their own language? Why not identify their mother tongue with the divine idiom spoken by the progenitor of all mortals? What if the languages of Paradise were Flemish or Tuscan, Syriac or Old German? Diverse texts – from the Church Fathers to Leibniz and Renan – pose these questions, frequently no less politically hinged than theologically.

These interrogations are haunted by the cataclasm of Babel, that fable of disproportionate construction in which humanity – quite unawares – discovered politics, while simultaneously finding itself assailed by linguistic amnesia, replacing the original language by innumerable forms of speech rooted in primeval oblivion. But exactly for this reason, the authors pose the following question: if all languages stem from Babel, are we not entitled to seek, in each dialect, the divine spark of Adamic speech – and to attempt to aggregate these precious remnants, like scattered pearls, and thus to restore the unique language of Paradise?

Thus it was that in 1690 Père Thomassin, 'reducing' all languages to Hebrew, sought to demonstrate that the proximity between Hebrew and

French is such that 'one may truthfully say that, basically, they are no other than one and the same language'.⁵ Thus again, in the *Encyclopaedia* compiled by Diderot and d'Alembert, the author of the entry on 'Language', Beauzée, affirmed, in 1765, that French is linked 'by Celtic to Hebrew'.⁶

Two centuries earlier, in 1569, a Flemish scholar named Jan Van Gorp expressed the opinion that the language of Paradise was his own mother tongue.⁷ This proclamation – often discussed by authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – was particularly disseminated by Leibniz, among others, who noted that Van Gorp 'was not so wrong to claim that the Germanic language, which he called Cimbric [the idiom of his ancestors, founders of Antwerp], had as many, if not more, marks of the primitive, than Hebrew itself'.⁸ Diverging (along with others) from the clerical orthodoxy of the Church Fathers, the great majority of whom sought to recognize Hebrew as the universal mother tongue, Leibniz was among those who contributed to the development of the initially regional, then subsequently national, idea in Europe. Undoubtedly, the passion of the mother tongue, so often allied with that of the nation, incited Leibniz, otherwise recognizably rather 'cosmopolitan', to identify, in 1697, 'the origin of the peoples and languages of Europe 'with 'the archaic German language' (*Stecket also im Teutschen Alterthum und sonderlich in der Teutschen uralten Sprache, ... der Ursprung der Europäischen Völker und Sprachen*).⁹

Leibniz's testimony is priceless. It indicates to what degree the prehistory of the Indo-European idea – then called 'Scythian' or 'Japhetic' – could set in motion abstract schemes of thought, opening novel perspectives on the knowledge of that period, while simultaneously linking these to religious and national ideas, haunted by phantasmagoria which inexorably led to the search for an 'archaic language'.¹⁰

In his study on 'the genius of the French language', Marc Fumaroli recalls how Cartesian linguistics enriched the discourse of those who identified the French language with natural order, with clarity, with that Parisian intelligence which aspires at being, simultaneously, both strict and sensitive. He cited a text by Louis le Laboureur who, in 1667, stated that it had formerly been said that Spanish, Italian and French 'were all three [present] at the creation of the world, that God used Spanish to forbid Adam to touch those fatal apples, that the Devil used Italian to persuade them to eat of them, and that Adam and Eve, after they had believed him, used French to God to apologize for their disobedience'.¹¹

About 20 years later, in 1688, a Swedish author, Andreas Kempe, published a pamphlet entitled *Die Sprachen des Paradieses [The Languages of Paradise]*. In that satire, he made fun of the erudite scholars who invested efforts in attempting to discover the language of the first Edenic conversations between God, Adam, Eve and the serpent.¹² He scoffed at one such debate in

which it transpired that Adam spoke Danish and God Swedish – *nation oblige!* As for the serpent, he was said to have borrowed a diabolical language to seduce a ‘voluptuous’ and mute Eve. In these final years of the seventeenth century, at least in this Scandinavian context, the language of Satanic seduction, sinuous as the reptile himself, was no longer Italian, which Louis le Laboureur had issued forth from the mouth of ‘the Devil’, but French.

Yet this comic scene should not divert our attention from observing that, in their indulgences with word games, their twisting of terms to make them show – through the use of poetic etymologies – unfathomable theological or national origins, these same erudite scholars were also the first masters and teachers of comparative linguistics.

Since the sixteenth century, Europe has been troubled by the discovery of languages spoken in the American New World. These hitherto unknown tongues gave rise to a disturbing question: what if these languages, unlike all others, had not originated during the time of *Genesis*, after the Great Confusion? For some, this question sufficed to cast instant doubt on the universality of the Flood and Babel, and thus on the truth of the Biblical account.

At the same time, the Christian Occident was shaken by the first words of Sanskrit, imported, along with several varieties of spice, in the pouches of Italian, English and French Jesuits toward the end of the sixteenth century. This may have led, at the conclusion of the eighteenth century, to the invention of the Indo-European idea.¹³ Finally, Reformation and counter-Reformation contributed to the remodelling of intellectual and political landscapes, defining hitherto unheard-of rules for reading the Bible, and thus eventually permitting other approaches, new observations of natural and cultural data, and prompting the dawn of new knowledge.

‘THIS MORTAL DREAM OF ESCAPING ONE’S MOTHER’S MILK’

Prolonging our incursion into the vastly rich bibliography of the history of linguistics, let us now devote our attention to another aspect. A profusion of literary traditions, having survived to this day, testify to the investment of time and resources by the most erudite of authors in plumbing the question of the language of origins; yet others, less numerous, express their mistrust of these paradisiacal topics.

In other, perhaps oversimplified, words: whereas, on one hand, quite a few bards of a glorious past extolled the virtues of their ancestors, masters of a sublime tongue – and, as it happened, Leibniz, considered the father of modern linguistics, was one of them, at least as far as certain pages of his work attest – there were others who criticized the very concept of being able to reconstruct the Adamic language.

This original language, overestimated no more and no less than any nation that attempted to attribute its source to this language, succeeded in becoming, simultaneously, the product and the impetus of more than one nationalist ideology. We shall remember the immense importance the Nazi Reich – occupying Europe barely 50 years ago – assigned to the ideas of the purity of the Aryan language, race and nation – the concept of ‘Aryan’ (like that of Indo-European, Indo-Germanic and, indeed, Semitic) having arisen from late eighteenth-century linguistics.¹⁴

Several texts by authors who regarded with suspicion those who considered themselves superior by virtue of their origins – even if, let it be stressed, their writing was not necessarily devoid of regionalism and/or nationalism – will be examined. Consider Herder, for example, the father of German romanticism, Lutheran pastor and author (in 1770) of a *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, who, while eulogizing new forms of nationalism, still warned his readers against the dangers of a theologico-political archaeology. Thus, in his *Ideas on Philosophy*, he wrote: ‘Every old nation very much loves to consider itself as the first-born and to regard its own country as the birthplace of humanity.’¹⁵

As has been noted by Abdelfattah Kilito,¹⁶ one finds that scholars not within Christian circles are equally reticent to elect a superior language. In the eleventh century, the Muslim theologian, Ibn Hazm, affirmed that ‘we do not know what language Adam originally possessed’, before concluding: ‘Certain peoples have imagined that their language surpassed all others in value. This means nothing, ... and, on the other hand, we have no revealed text which proclaims any language to be superior to any other’.¹⁷ Despite the magnanimity modern eyes may acknowledge from this passage, its author was indubitably first and foremost a scrupulous theologian, mindful of the literalness of Scripture.

Elsewhere in Europe, an uneasy Christianity was slowly but surely discovering that, even if Latin, in addition to Hebrew and Greek, was regarded as a sacred language, this was no reason to declare vernacular tongues as beyond the pale of culture, nor to have contempt for the indigenous and domestic forms of speech practiced in the various regions. It was in just such a context, at the dawn of the fourteenth century, that Dante – author of the *Divine Comedy* and master of the vernacular – dedicated a treatise to *Vulgar Eloquence*, ridiculing those who, in the backwoods of humanity, believed themselves to possess the secrets of the language of Paradise and speak in the divine tongue of Adam:

Here, as on numerous other occasions, any insignificant village like Petramala¹⁸ becomes a very great city and the homeland of the majority of Adam’s children. As a matter of fact, whosoever could

take leave of his senses as to believe that the place of his nation is the most charming under the sun, would prefer his vulgar language – that is, his mother tongue – to all others, and consequentially would believe that it is the same as that used by Adam'.¹⁹

In this same passage, to qualify Adam's language, Dante stated that, it was 'that idiom which is believed to have been used by the motherless man [*vir sine matre*], the man who was not breastfed [*vir sine lacte*], the man who never saw his childhood grow old'. This mortal dream of escaping one's mother's milk, this dream of not having been borne by woman, appears to offer an enlightening poetic formula which can illustrate the Adamic seduction which so inspired the national, and later nationalist, quest for an original language.

BABEL, OR COMMON REASON

The influence exerted by the Hebrew *Genesis* on theories concerning language and languages in cultures fashioned by Biblical archives gives rise to two comments. Firstly, the fascination with origins, in a linguistic context, appeared rather late in Biblical commentary; the most ancient Hebrew sources did not attempt to identify the Adamic language; it was mainly the Church Fathers who delved into the sensitive questions of the language spoken by the First Man.²⁰

Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that the confusion of Babel, which inspired innumerable commentaries, was viewed for a long time as a story that enabled the establishment of a rational explanation of a common linguistic principle underlying a diversity of idioms. In fact, for many scholars, what occurred at Babel was not only a confusion; this was the place where the 'Reason' present at the origin of the unique language came to perfuse the multiplicity of dialects which later became the languages of the world.

The myth of Babel, then, for more than one Renaissance author, was considered as the guarantee of a link between the various languages. These authors wanted to detect in Babel (and thought themselves capable of doing so), above and beyond divine punishment, over and above confusion, a 'Common Reason', underlying all forms of human speech. This is the reason why the Swiss theologian, Theodor Bibliander – Zwingli's successor at the Münsterschule in Zurich – believed Babel to have guaranteed a common, universal reason – which, in effect, is no more than the rationality which structures human language.

According to Bibliander, comparative linguistics may well be based on a gentler view of the drama of Babel. For him, the mingling of languages

happened *in illa subita confusione*,²¹ in confusion that was as sudden as it was slight; this belief enabled Bibliander to construct, in a work published in 1548, a theory of the ‘reason common to all languages’.²² He, thus, literally proposed a ‘science of remnants’; thanks to his by no means radical vision of Babel, he postulated that the residue of the original language could be found in all the tongues of humankind – thus simultaneously ensuring the universal translation of the divine message borne by Christ.

Such an interpretation of the Babel myth assured its readers not only of the existence of ‘unity in diversity’, but also that the diversity of languages is only possible because a common and unique linguistic reason presides over this plurality. Need it be emphasized that such a reading of Babel was amply satisfactory to those sixteenth-century scholars who sought, at any price, to reconcile science and religion? This, indeed, would continue to be the case well into the eighteenth century, when Rousseau, in Chapter IX of his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, wrote: ‘It is convenient to reconcile the authority of Scripture with ancient monuments, and one does not have to treat traditions as ancient as the people who have transmitted them to us, as fables’.²³ Nonetheless, even though he states in the introduction to his essay that ‘speech being the first social institution, owes its form to no more than merely natural causes’, Rousseau recalls the existence of an original language revealed by God, which disappeared just as agriculture was discovered.

This desire to ‘reconcile’ reason with religion has already been noted in Beauzée, who stated that ‘Reason and revelation, so to speak, are two different channels which carry water from the same spring’.²⁴ This one can read in the entry on ‘Language’, in the great *Encyclopédie* of the *Lumières*, whose tradition is still, in many respects, our own. As the twentieth century draws to a close, the calendar (which has become, as it were, universal) reminds all humankind of the birth, 2,000 years ago, of a Christianity which has never ceased to seek its roots in a Hebrew *Genesis*, where even the very word of Creation is written in indecipherable vowels.

Translated by Sharon Neeman

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NOTES

1. In the space of three pages, in the first volume of his *De Genesi at Litteram I*, II, 4 – III, 8, ed. P. Agaësse and A. Solignac (1972), pp.87–91, Augustine asks no less than 15 times the question of the significance to be attached to the divine *Fiat Lux*; Isidore of Seville, *Étymologies* IX, 1, 11, ed. M. Reydellet (Paris, 1984), p.39 (*Cuiusmodi autem lingua est Deus in principio mundi dum diceret: ‘Fiat lux’ invenire difficile est*).
2. For more information, see A. Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel. Geschichte der Meinungen*

- über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker* I – IV, Stuttgart, 1957–1963 (reprinted Munich, DTV, 1995). See also U. Eco, *La recherche de la langue parfaite dans la culture Européenne* (French edition: Paris, Seuil, 1994) or *The Search for the Perfect Language* (English edition: Blackwell, 1995).
3. For more details on these questions, cf. M. Olender, 'Sur un "oubli" linguistique', in Y. Bonnefoy (ed.), *La conscience de soi et la poésie. Poésie et rhétorique*, Colloque de la Fondation Hugot du Collège de France (Paris: Lachenal & Ritter, 1997), pp.267–96.
 4. M. Olender, *The Languages of Paradise. Race, Religion and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* (1989), Foreword by J.P. Vernant, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1992).
 5. Louis Thomassin, *La Méthode d'étudier et d'enseigner Chrestienement et utilement la Grammaire, ou les Langues par rapport à l'écriture sainte en les réduisant toutes à l'Hébreu* (1690) (Paris, 1693), p.12.
 6. *Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire universel raisonné des connaissances humaines*, Vol. 25 (ed. 1773), pp.635–636 (s.v. *Langue*); Thomassin is quoted there on p.619.
 7. *Origines Antwerpianae...* (Antwerp, 1569). Information on Jan Van Gorp's life and work may be found in Eduard Frederickx's thesis, *Ioannes Goropius Becanus (1519–1573). Leven en Werk* (Louvain: Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, 1973); G.J. Metcalf, 'The Indo-European Hypothesis in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in Dell H. Hymes (ed.), *Studies in the History of Linguistics, Traditions and Paradigms* (London, Bloomington, 1974), pp.233–57; D. Droixhe, *La linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire (1600–1800). Rationalisme et révolutions positivistes* (Geneva/Paris, 1978) (see index); A. Grafton, 'Traditions of Invention and Inventions of Tradition in Renaissance Italy: Annus of Viterbo', in *Defenders of the Text. The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA, London, 1991), pp.99–101.
 8. G.W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (1704, 1st ed. Raspe, Amsterdam/Leipzig, 1765) in *Oeuvres philosophiques I*, ed. P. Janet (Paris, 1900), p.243.
 9. G.W. Leibniz, 'Unvorgreifliche Gedanken, betreffend die Ausübung und Verbesserung der deutschen Sprache' (1698), in *Deutsche Schriften*, ed. G.E. Guhrauer (Berlin, 1838), Vol.1, No. 46, p.465. The quotation in its more complete form follows: 'Stecket also im Teutschen Alterthum und sonderlich in der Teutschen uralten Sprache, so über das Alter aller Griechischen und Lateinischen Bücher hinauf steigt, der Ursprung der Europäischen Völker und Sprachen, auch zum Theil des uralten Gottesdienstes, der Sitten, Rechte des Adels'. In these same pages Leibniz insisted again, in various ways, on this primacy of 'the German language', whose study 'enlightens ... all of Europe' (p.464, No.42). For the historical and intellectual contexts, in a broader sense, see W.W. Chambers, 'Language and Nationality in German Preromantic and Romantic Thought', *The Modern Language Review* 41, 4 (1946), pp.382–92 (for Leibniz, pp.382–3).
 10. For some elements of this 'prehistory' of the Indo-European idea and comparative linguistics, cf. M. Olender, 'Europe, or How to Escape Babel', in A. Grafton and S.L. Marchand (eds.), *Proof and Persuasion in History*, Colloquium, Princeton University, in *History and Theory. Studies in the Philosophy of History* (Wesleyan University Theme issue 33, 1994), pp.5–25.
 11. Louis le Laboureur, *Des avantages de la langue françoise sur la langue latine* (1667), p.27, quoted by Marc Fumaroli: 'Le génie de la langue française', in P. Nora (dir.), *Les lieux de mémoire* III, 3 (Gallimard, 1992), p.952 (reprinted in *Trois institutions littéraires*, Folio H. No. 62, 1994, pp.285–6).
 12. For information and bibliography on Kempe, see M. Olender, *The Languages...*, pp.1ff.
 13. For sources, texts and contexts, see M. Olender, 'Europe, or How to Escape...', pp.20ff., and nn.69ff.
 14. The late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries are discussed in my *Languages of Paradise*. For information on several Aryanizing uses of the Indo-European idea in the twentieth century, see M. Olender, 'Georges Dumézil et les usages "politiques" de la préhistoire indo-européenne', in Roger-Pol Droit (dir.), *Les Grecs, les Romains et nous. L'antiquité est-elle moderne?* (Paris, Le Monde Press, 1991), pp.191–228. Additional information may be found in 'Au panthéon de la Nouvelle Droite', *L'Histoire*, 159 (October 1992), pp.48–51.

15. J.G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791), ed. B. Suphan, Vol.13 (Berlin, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1887), p.431.
16. Professor at the University of Rabat, A. Kilito gave a series of lectures on this subject in the spring of 1990, at the Collège de France in Paris.
17. *Al-Ihkam fi'usul al-'ahkam*, ed. Z.A. Yusuf (Cairo, undated), Vol.1, pp.33–4. See also R. Arnaldez, *Grammaire et théologie chez Ibn Hazm de Cordoue. Essai sur la structure et les conditions de la pensée musulmane* (Paris, Vrin, 1956), pp.45–7; the above quote is an English retranslation of the French translation appearing in that work.
18. Pietramala; this was a lost village between Florence and Bologna.
19. Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I, 6, 2, ed. G.B. Squarotti (Turin, 1983), p.396.
20. I am presently preparing a study on this point. See also M. Idel, 'Le langage mystique: de la cosmologie à l'épistémologie', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 213–14 (1996), pp.380–81.
21. Th. Bibliander, *De optimo genere grammaticorum Hebraicorum commentarius* (Basel: Hieron Curio, 1542), p.52.
22. *De ratione communi omnium linguarum et literarum commentarius* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1548).
23. J.-J. Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*, Chapter II and Chapter XII, text edited and presented by Jean Starobinski (Paris: Gallimard, 1990 – Folio 'Essays', No.135), pp.96–7; subsequently, p.59. In this connection, see also M. Olender, 'Sur un "oubli" linguistique...', pp.281–4, and the discussion with J. Starobinski, pp.290–94.
24. *Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire universel raisonné des connaissances humaines*, Vol.25 (ed. 173), p.619 (s.v. *Langue*).