

BABEL IN TRANSLATION

What the World needs most is about 1,000 more dead languages – and one more alive.

- C. K. Ogden, *The System of Basic English*

Senior Honors Thesis in English

Submitted by Galen Tan

4/29/2009

Tufts University

Introduction

Metaphors are one among many things which make me despair of writing.

- Kafka, *Journal*, 6 November 1921

The seeds of this project were planted, strangely enough, in a class on Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*. Painted in Dante's verse, the giant Nimrod, architect of Man's hubristic attempt to reach the heavens, is chained in the eighth circle of the Inferno, his cries incomprehensible to the curious onlookers. Inviting the catastrophe of language, Dante implies, is a crime against God and humanity. The motif of babble and Babel also speaks to Dante's search for the unifying Italian vernacular. While this project has drifted far from Dante, the concern for language in its myriad forms and the attendant complications has not changed much, and the figure of Babel still remains central to framing the issues around it. Pioneers of artificial languages, in particular, often employ the figure of Babel in their rhetoric to justify their new language. Jacques Derrida's reading of the Babel myth in relation to the act of translation challenges the latent assumptions that these pioneers make in using the myth of Babel, and thus challenges the motivations behind creating artificial languages.

My thesis, not without violence to the substance, is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a review of the figure of Babel, briefly sketching out the history of Babel in its classical roots, before examining in greater depth the issues laid out by George Steiner's *After Babel*. Steiner's work expounds at length on the figure of Babel and translation, making references to Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" and the language project of Basic International English by I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden. The question of translation and its difficulties, as creators of artificial languages argue, must be answered by methods of either

improving existing languages or creating new languages in order to escape the burden of Babel. Basic International English and Esperanto are but a few of many such attempts.

The second part extends on the historic debate, consisting of a review of Babel in Derrida's critiques, concentrating on "Des Tours de Babel," "The Eyes of Language," "Otobiographies: the Ear of the Other," the chapter on the "dangerous supplement" in *Of Grammatology*, and "On Raising an Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy." Derrida's engagement with the texts of Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Immanuel Kant fleshes out his interest in the figure of Babel, and the significance that the figure of Babel holds for the problems of language and translation. I break his engagement with the figure of Babel into multiple component parts, and attempt to illustrate what Derrida adds to the ongoing debate on translation. Such components include engagement on the questions of the metaphor of vitality, the theological concepts of sacredness and profanity, the temporal dimension of Babel, the idea of tragedy and morality to Babel, and the figure of apocalypse. Moreover, the very act of disassembling the Babel myth, which itself is a coherent narrative on the scattering of a single tongue, for ease of critique lends itself to a discussion of the figure of the fragment. The Adamic tongue, once whole, is broken into many fragments of the original; this linguistic fragmentation, as the myth tells, is cursed to incompleteness. Such a discussion is assisted by the reading of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* with regard to the fragment in the German Romanticism.

The third part examines historical efforts to break out of the perceived curse of Babel, in the form of the artificial language movement and of I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden's Basic International English. As Ogden implies in his guide to Basic English, Babel is a curse. The

inability to translate without loss between languages and the imperfections of language leads to miscommunication, the chief cause of war. What, then, does it mean to institute a language with the goal of better enabling international communication, facilitating commercial and technological progress through a common language? As Ogden implies, peace. This section traces the antecedents of the artificial language movement back to the growth of scientific progress in the seventeenth century and efforts to institute a taxonomy of language which runs concurrent with the attempt to classify flora and fauna, before examining the specific historic underpinnings and the aims of the projects of Esperanto and Basic International English. Given prior extrapolation of Derrida's approach to the figure of Babel and the prominent use of the Babel to justify these language projects, the Derridian critique of Babel can then be extended to the underpinnings of these language projects. In particular, I will be concentrating on Basic International English as a case study.

The metaphor of translation, and consequently Babel which represents the necessity of translation, is ever part of the movement for globalization, both literary and otherwise. More recent developments in the field of literary studies include postcolonial theory and comparative literature. These disciplines, while recognizing the power of national boundaries, also explore the concept of literariness outside the Western canon. Goethe's conception of the *Weltliteratur*, in contrast to "national" literature, seems to ignore the national boundaries in favor of a more universal conception of the literary. Erich Auerbach develops this conception of the *Weltliteratur* and explicates the problems present in interpreting such *Weltliteratur* in his "Philology and *Weltliteratur*."¹ Such problems include the issue of scale and knowledge; Wai Chee Dimock's "Planetary Time and Global Translation" asks how we can set an appropriate scope for culture

¹ Erich Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," trans. Marie and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review*, Vol XIII, No. 1, Winter 1969. Accessed 17 April, 2009 at <http://global.wisc.edu/worldlit/readings/auerbach-philology.pdf>

and literature when the map we exist on is “planetary in scope.”² Thinking about Babel as the shattering of the totality of language only scratches lightly on the surface of this intellectual debate.

Beyond the field of literary study, the forces of commerce and technology forge ever deeper connections between countries, rewriting national boundaries. Much has been written on the imminent downfall of Westphalian sovereignty, yet national borders remain, alongside trading blocs and disparate cultural narratives. What might the examination of the search for that perfect language, suited for technical and philosophical discourse, and the elimination of miscommunication mean for the modern era? This search for such a language is surely made problematic through a working through of these structures through the lens of Derridian criticism. Just as translation does damage to the subject being translated, translation also opens up the possibility of growth and expansion. Will the end of Babel, as the proponents of these languages promise, be a revelation, or will it seal a kind of apocalypse through the end of translation? Is such an apocalypse even possible?

² Wai Chee Dimock, “Planetary Time and Global Translation: “Context in Literary Studies,” *Common Knowledge* 9:3, Duke University Press, 2003. Accessed 17 April, 2009 at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/common_knowledge/v009/9.3dimock.pdf

The Biblical Babel

The myth of Babel is an origin myth that offers coherence through explanation to the confusion of many languages. While multiple cultures have their own origin myths that cover the tale of catastrophic fragmentation from a single originary language, the story of the Biblical Babel resonates because it traverses and affects the critical space wherein the writers I examine operate. The story of Babel can be found in the text of the Bible, in Genesis 11: 1- 9. The text of the King James translation of the Bible is reproduced below:

- 1: And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
- 2: And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
- 3: And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.
- 4: And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
- 5: And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
- 6: And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
- 7: Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
- 8: So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
- 9: Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.³

The Biblical passage synchronizes language with production and generation. Possessing a single language enables man to readily combine his effort for purposes of civilization and scientific development as embodied by the heaven-reaching tower. The tower itself is linked to the act of “making a name,” whereby the feat of engineering will cement the tribe’s reputation and their

³ King James Bible, Genesis 11:1-9. Accessed 17 April, 2009 at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/KjvGene.html>

identity, thus preventing a scattering of the tribe. Such name-making is an attempt to seal away the possibility of catastrophe, though it instead seals the fate of the tribe. In the construction of their city, their single language enables completely (“nothing will be restrained from them”). Conversely, the confounding of language and the following incomprehension castrates this infinite capacity. Implicit in the divine punishment is the fear of this infinite capacity, be it as a threat to God or to Man. Finally, the nameless tower is stamped with the name Babel as the originating point of confusion and scattering of the once-united tribe, though who provides the name of Babel remains unsaid. Babel, named in the wake of the catastrophe, proliferates in the passage, and is at least threefold: Babel-as-name, Babel-as-event, and Babel-as-location.

The passage suggests that a unified language enables communication. Communication enables building and production; the catastrophe that befalls this communication is confusion imposed by divine violence. Catastrophe-as-divine violence in the passage supports the reading of the scattering of the original tribe as a *fragmentation* of the tribe; a mere scattering implies original existence as discrete particles while the fragment implies an original whole that becomes shattered through traumatic violence. Man is able to cooperate in peace for the great building of the tower when he speaks one language; a plurality of languages rife with mutual incomprehension dooms such efforts to failure. Man, scattered geographically and linguistically, cannot complete his works. Therefore, what accounts for the multiplicity of languages? The tale of Babel suggests that this multiplicity comes as a punishment – Man would much prefer to have that single tongue, but cannot because of divine retribution. John Fyler quotes St. Augustine in ascribing how the sinful pride of Man in building Babel invites punishment from God, spilling the damage to his soul over to language: “This pride is signified by the famous tower raised toward heaven at the time when wicked men justly received incompatible languages [*voces*

dissonas] to match their incompatible minds.”⁴ This punishment by God thus gains moral dimensions. Man must suffer under this God’s wrath, and efforts to overcome it are ever imperfect. Beyond this tragic dimension, the story of Babel frames the plurality of languages as fragments fallen from a lost whole. Each language, while it possesses its own existence, nonetheless derives from a single origin that is privileged over its fragmented parts. In a world of a united tongue, Man has “nothing restrained from him”; after the dismemberment of this universal speech, the implication is that such infinite capacity is rendered impotent.

Fyler, on the Biblical history of language, writes of four languages locked in a vertical hierarchy: God’s (Word as Creation), Adam’s (through which the birds and beasts are named), the language handed to Adam’s descendants after the Fall, and “the fourth and most depraved comprises our diverse tongues after Babel.”⁵ God’s Word creates light, the seas, the world. There is no distance between signifier and signified. While Man cannot aspire to the Word, even the original language spoken by Man wields significant power. The lost Adamic tongue through which Adam named all the beasts and the birds of the air posited equality between name and form; these names were connected to the *being* of these creatures.⁶ Man, cast out of Eden and afflicted with the original Sin, cannot use this language without contamination. As Steiner summarizes on the Babel-event:

Our speech interposes itself between apprehension and truth like a dusty pane or warped mirror. The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it. Thus Babel was a second Fall, in some regards as desolate as the first. Adam has been driven from the garden; now men were harried, like yelping dogs,

⁴ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.4: 60-61, quoted in John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35.

⁵ John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

out of the single family of man. And they were exiled from the assurance of being able to grasp and communicate reality.⁷

The catastrophe of Babel supplements the catastrophe of the Fall. This relationship suggests a similar relationship between language and the human soul. Damage to one tarnishes the other.

Like Man's immortal soul, redemption also exists for language. Fyler characterizes the Pentecost as the antitype of Babel. Fyler writes at length on how "at scattered points in the long expanse of time between Babel and Pentecost, issues of language come to the fore in the Bible – as exceptions to the rule of obscure prophecy and double meanings, as manifestations of God's power, and as forceful reminders of a largely vanished clarity."⁸ In Acts 2:1-9, the Pentecost that awaits at the Day of Judgment is hinted at when the breath of God overwrites the shattered language of Man in divine *glossolalia*. The disparate fragments of language are reunited through speech imposed by God.

Acts 2: 1-9

1 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.

2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.

4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

5 And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.

6 Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.

7 And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?

8 And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? ⁹

⁷ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 59.

⁸ John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.

The fascinating aspects of the Pentecost mirror Babel. Like Babel, the Pentecostal language is externally imposed by divine agency. Confusion arises, but originating from wonder at the sudden transparency of transmission rather than the vengeful opacity of Babel. This divine tongue is transmissible without need for translation, automatically legible in each of the separated languages. The divine language has no positive existence as a separate language; it instead enables a complete translative act free from the errors of mortal hands. The aspect of this language is that it “possesses” other tongues, complementing their shortcomings in the communicative act and repairing the communicative deficit in speaking between different languages. The supplementation provided by the Pentecostal language denigrates existing languages by illustrating their shortcoming. Man is ever divided by his native tongue and to hear the other speak with native fluency in his birth-tongue is cause for wonder; to speak in another tongue is possible but, without the same native facility, possibly insufficient. God’s speech also appears to appropriate the authority of the translator by vouchsafing a “perfect” translation of speech. Language, then, is mediated and controlled by a divine authority; perfectibility of communication can only be provided through divine agency. Yet, this Pentecostal incident does not “reunite” the tongues of Man into a single tongue; the divine tongue moves through the different fragments of language.

Fyler addresses this paradox that “unity and multiplicity are connected underneath their apparent opposition” when he writes on the commentaries on Acts 2.1-4:

The outward remnants of Babel can mask an inward unity, a single language of the human heart as it reaches toward the divine, when worship of God replaces idolatry and,

⁹ King James Bible, Acts 2: 1-12. Accessed 17 April, 2009 at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/KjvActs.html>

Aquinas says, “the gift of tongues was the remedy to be applied to the diversity of tongues.” Yet even in the display of this gift, a vestigial taint of Babel remains.¹⁰

Babel is ever present; the Pentecost “must remain a promise until the Day of Judgment.”¹¹ Yet the apprehension and imminence of a linguistic unity is nonetheless hinted at by this passage.

The bracketing of the shattered language problem with the Biblical Babel and the Pentecost provides the frame of reference within which questions of language and translation are asked. While often minimizing or disavowing the presence of theological faith in the translation debate, critics often reference Babel as a proper name for the problems of translation and language. For example, Ogden and Richards’s disavowal of “Word-Magic” in *The Meaning of Meanings* appears as a rejection of the theological. “Word-Magic” is the belief in that meaning is related to word-as-signifier; Ogden and Richards believed that the connection between words and meanings is purely arbitrary and to believe otherwise is to condemn oneself to ignorance and superstition.¹² Yet Ogden writes on the problem of Babelization in his *The System of Basic English*, even as he advocates a “scientific” response to this problem through a systemic simplification of the English language.

¹⁰ John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹² C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923), 35.

Steiner's *After Babel*

The Pentecost/Babel bracketing of the origin of multiple languages has been taken less as a literal recount of events than as a metaphor for translation. Steiner, in *After Babel*, approaches translation via the metaphor of Babel, functioning as an entry point into the discussion of the theory of language and translation under the backdrop of Babel.

Steiner explicitly discusses the myth of Babel in his chapter "Language and Gnosis." Steiner writes that his review of the Babel myth across civilizations demonstrates a widespread belief across cultures that the differences of language are tied to "two main conjectures, two great attempts at solving the riddle via metaphor": "some awful error was committed, an accidental release of linguistic chaos, in the mode of Pandora's box. Or, more commonly, man's language condition, the incommunicados that so absurdly divide him are a punishment."¹³ Steiner traces this understanding of the Babel myth as it percolates through history into the occult, philosophical and linguistic traditions.

Steiner's survey thus reveals a historical belief by many cultures that divisions in language are not a "natural" state. Steiner writes that in the occult tradition, "a single primal language, an *Ur-Sprache* lies behind our present discord" that "enabled all men to understand one another, to communicate with perfect ease."¹⁴ Theologians sought to recover this lost speech, for "if man could break down the prison walls of scattered and polluted speech (the rubble of the smashed tower), he would again have access to the inner penetralia of reality. He would know the truth as he spoke it."¹⁵ Such a search made itself felt even in the sciences; Kepler held that

¹³ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

“[the sparks of Divine significance were] in the immaculate logic of mathematics and in the harmonics, also mathematical in essence, of instrumental and celestial music.”¹⁶ Steiner himself acknowledges the advantages of Man possessing a single tongue:

No conceivable gain can have accrued to the crowded, economically harried Philippine islands from from their division by the Bikol, Chabokano, Ermitano, Tagalog, and Wraywaray languages (only to name the most prominent of some thirty tongues), or from the related fact that for four of these five idioms the United States Employment Service can list only one qualified translator. Numerous cultures and communities have passed out of history as linguistic ‘drop-outs’. Not because their own particular speech was in any way inadequate, but because it prevented communication with the principal currents of intellectual and political force. Countless tribal societies have withered inward, isolated by language barriers even from their near neighbours. Time and again, linguistic differences and the profoundly exasperating inability of human beings to understand each other have bred hatred and reciprocal contempt.¹⁷

The advantages of possessing a single tongue, both in the occult tradition and in the more secular sense, are numerous.

The gap between the secular and the occult was soon bridged. Language mysticism entered modern linguistic study through Leibniz and Hamann.¹⁸ The philosophy of language holds two opposing positions. The first is that “the underlying structure of language is universal and common to all men”; the second holds that “universal deep structures are either fathomless to logical and psychological investigation or of an order so abstract, so generalized as to be well-nigh trivial.”¹⁹ This polarity underlies the premises of Basic International English that will be examined later in this study.

Steiner’s examination of the field of translation allows for a steering back towards the various components of the Babel figure. We can extrapolate the characteristics of Babel through

¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷ Ibid., 55-56.

¹⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 73-74.

examining the components of translation: the notion of the life of language, the scope of translation, translation as doomed to incompleteness, linguistic multiplicity as driven by the need for fiction and for a private language, and translation as a supplement.

Steiner addresses the notion of life in language, when he poses the following questions and his answer:

Do languages wane, do their powers of shaping response atrophy? Are there linguistic reflexes which have slowed and lost vital exactitude? The danger in putting the question this way is obvious: to think of the life and death of language in organic, temporal terms may be an animist fiction. Languages are wholly arbitrary sets of signals and conventionalized counters. Though the great master Tartakower thought otherwise, we do not ascribe feelings or some mystery of autonomous being to chess pieces. Yet the intimation of life-force and the concomitant notion of linguistic decay are difficult to discard.²⁰

Once noting the prevalence of the vitalist metaphor in the study of language, Steiner mounts the following counterarguments against the convergence of biological language and life:

The Darwinian parallel also breaks down on the crucial point of large numbers. The multiplicity of fauna and flora does not represent randomness or waste. ... No language is demonstrably adaptive in this sense. None is concordant with any particular geophysical environment.²¹

Language is not moved by the same drivers as biological life. Different words to mean “sand” or “snow” are not demonstrably superior to one another despite variance in habitat. Yet, language nonetheless is subject to growth in the generative sense. Interpretation creates the life of language through the continual adding of the original work:

In their use of ‘speculative instruments’, critic, editor, actor and reader are on common ground. Through their diversely accentuated but cognate needs, written language achieves a continuation of life.²²

The blaze of life will be spurious. But only great art both solicits and withstands exhaustive or willful interpretation.

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹ Ibid., 55.

²² Ibid., 26-27.

‘Interpretation’ as that which gives language life beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription, is what I am concerned with.²³

Steiner’s argument implies that interpretation and translation are cut from the same cloth. The act of interpreting registers of language extends from transmissions between languages to within language. Therefore, translation (and the interpretation implicit in the translative act) adds to the growth of language (language, while not organic, is still subject to growth), even as such interpretation does damage to the pure origin of the original:

Unquestionably there is a dimension of loss, of breakage – hence, as we have seen, the fear of translation, the taboos on revelatory export which hedge sacred texts, ritual nominations, and formulas in any cultures. But the residue is also, and decisively positive. The work translated is enhanced.²⁴

The act of translation as envisioned by Steiner appears to be generative; an excess is produced that “enhances” the translated work. This seems to appear in opposition to what he later categorizes as “good” translation which must possess a kind of equity between translated and originating texts:

The final stage or moment in the process of translation is that which I have called 'compensation' or 'restitution'. The translation restores the equilibrium between itself and the original, between source-language and receptor-language which had been disrupted by the translator's interpretive attack and appropriation. The paradigm of translation stays incomplete until reciprocity has been achieved, until the original has regained as much as it had lost. ... This dialectic of trust, of reciprocal enhancement is, in essence, both moral and linguistic. It makes of the language of translation a language which has its own status of vulnerability, of unhousedness, of elucidative strangeness because it is an instrument of relation between the foreign tongue and one's own.²⁵

Through this restitution that aims to restore equilibrium by maintaining equity between gain and loss, a generative excess, a growth, is produced that unveils the insufficiency of the originating language and “completes” the translation. Restitution can only be enacted through imposed

²³ Ibid., 27.

²⁴ Ibid., 300.

²⁵ Ibid., 395.

violence – an “interpretive attack and appropriation” by the translator. Such violence, however, can only take place within the space permitted by translation. With the translation as defined as the transmission between the heterogeneous, in the context of Babel, translation can only occur between the fragments of that lost Adamic tongue. Translation is not necessary in the space of pure communication as represented by a universal language; only between the mutually incomprehensible dialects that spring from the Babel-catastrophe can translation take place.

However, the scope of fragmentation is much larger than imagined. Steiner writes that “translation exists because men speak different languages.”²⁶ If interpretation might be equated with translation, then translation occurs even within language. As Steiner defines it, “a human being performs an act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving a speech-message from any other human being.”²⁷ There is no perfect transmission of the message; translation intervenes because dialects are not merely linguistic – they are social, economic, cultural; universal.

Steiner’s attempt to explain the arguably counterintuitive proliferation of multiple languages leads him to the thesis of his book – multiple languages derive from the need for privacy and fiction:

In particular, I have put forward the hypothesis that the proliferation of mutually incomprehensible tongues stems from an absolutely fundamental impulse in language itself. I believe that the communication of information, of ostensive and verifiable ‘facts’, constitutes only one part, and perhaps a secondary part, of human discourse. The potentials of fiction, of counterfactuality, of undecidable futurity profoundly characterize both the origins and nature of speech.²⁸

Languages communicate inward to the native speaker with a density and pressure of shared intimation which are only partly, grudgingly yielded to the outsider. A major

²⁶ Ibid., 49.

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ Ibid., 473.

portion of language is enclosure and willed opaqueness. The intent is so ancient, its execution so remote from our public states of mind that we are not consciously aware of it. But it lives on in the layered fabric, in the tenacious quiddity of language, and becomes obvious when languages meet.²⁹

The veiling that falls between multiple languages that ostensibly dismembers the *Ur-Sprache* is a force exerted not from a grand author. Steiner argues that such veiling is exerted by “shared intimation” achieved through speaking a private (as opposed to a universal) tongue. Such private dialects in the imagining of Babel might be identified as the fragments of the universal tongue. In constructing his argument, Steiner inverts the rhetoric of dismemberment that is bound to the fragment. Linguistic dismemberment *adds* to language. Steiner goes further when he cites Angelus Silesius (Johann Scheffler) on how the possibility of physical dismemberment as enabling access to “the lost vulgate of Eden”:

Reaching back to the mysticism of Eckhart, Angelus Silesius asserts that God has, from the beginning of time, uttered only a single word. In that single utterance all reality is contained. The cosmic Word cannot be found in any known tongue; language after Babel cannot lead back to it. The bruit of human voices, so mysteriously diverse and mutually baffling, shuts out the sound of the Logos. There is no access except silence. Thus, for Silesius, the deaf and dumb are nearest of all living men to the lost vulgate of Eden.³⁰

In citing Silesius,³¹ Steiner expands this notion when he speculates on how deafness and dumbness, outcomes of dismemberment and death, enable a space of stability within confusion:

It is conceivable we have misread the Babel myth. The tower does not mark the end of a blessed monism, of a universal-language situation. The bewildering prodigality of

²⁹ Ibid., 285.

³⁰ Ibid., 63.

³¹ Angelus Silesius (1624 – 1677). “With the Jesuits Spee and Balde, he was one of the few distinguished poets that Germany produced in an age of poetical barrenness and debased taste. He published, in 1657, the two poetical works on which his fame rests. “The Soul's Spiritual Delight” (Heilige Seelenlust) is a collection of more than two hundred religious songs, many of them of great beauty, which have found their way not only into Catholic, but even into Protestant hymn books. “The Cherubic Pilgrim” (Der Cherubinische Wandersmann) is a collection of over sixteen hundred rhymed couplets, full of deep religious thought expressed in epigrammatic form.”

Guldner, B. (1907). Silesius Angelus. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Accessed April 26, 2009 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01488a.htm>

tongues had long existed, and had materially complicated the enterprise of men. In trying to build the tower, the nations stumbled on the great secret: that true understanding is possible only when there is silence. They built silently, and there lay the danger to God.³²

Steiner seems to suggest that the problems of translation are inescapable so long as we operate within language; a similar thread is echoed in Derrida's writing on the apocalyptic.

Steiner also touches on the problem of the proper name, albeit tangentially, when he surveys the problem that an excess of meaning can inflict on the restitutive capability of translation:

Polysemy, the capacity of the same word to mean different things, such difference ranging from nuance to antithesis, characterizes the language of ideology. Machiavelli noted that meaning could be dislocated in common speech so as to produce political confusion.

When antithetical meanings are forced upon the same word (Orwell's Newspeak), when the conceptual reach and valuation of a word can be altered by political decree, language loses credibility. Translation in the ordinary sense becomes impossible.

At the moment, the speech of politics, of social dissent, of journalism is full of loud ghost-words, being shouted back and forth, signifying contraries or nothing.³³

This excess and deficit of meaning (the forcing of antithetical meanings and the loss of credibility), and intervention on the part of the secular to create confusion through this excess/deficit hints at Scholem's lament on the secularization of Hebrew that will be addressed later in the paper. Most fascinating is the reference to "ghost-words" emptied of meaning or possessing an excess, a confusion of meanings. The confusing excess ("signifying contraries") or the lack of meaning ("... or nothing") are both insufficient. Again, Steiner's language returns to the rhetoric of fullness/emptiness and life/death that aligns with the language of Nietzsche, Scholem and Kant in the various essays that Derrida critiques.

³² George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 286.

³³ *Ibid.*, 34.

Steiner's study approaches the temporal component of translation from a scientific perspective:

One thing is clear: every language-act has a temporal determinant. No semantic form is timeless. When using a word we wake into resonance, as it were, its entire previous history. A text is embedded in specific historical time; it has what linguists call a diachronic structure. To read fully is to restore all that one can of the immediacies of value and intent in which speech actually occurs.³⁴

The bracketing of linguistic confusion with a beginning and ending creates the space for various components of Babel to take place. Such events can only take place within history.

Steiner's argument on the temporal aspect of language contrasts with his examination of the instant that denies history and paradoxically attempts to return before the moment of traumatic origin:

This metaphysics of the instant, this slamming of the door on long galleries of historical consciousness, is understandable. It has a fierce innocence. It embodies yet another surge towards Eden, toward that pastoral before time (there could be no autumn before the apple was off the branch, no fall before the Fall) which the eighteenth century sought in the allegedly static cultures of the south Pacific. But it is an innocence as destructive of civilization as it is, by concomitant logic, destructive of literate speech. Without the true diction of history, without the unbroken animation of a chosen past, we become flat shadows. Literature, whose genius stems from what Éluard called *le dur désir de durer*, has no chance of life outside constant translation within its own language.³⁵

Steiner argues, like Benjamin, that history grants life to language and literature; without history and translation, the life of language is destroyed – we “become flat shadows,” emptied of form and substance, suggesting equity between man and language that returns to the Biblical. Steiner's address of the “allegedly static cultures” touches on the colonial movement present in the spread of language as a form of communication and commerce. The fantasy of the instant is projected by colonial explorers onto these “static cultures,” apparently forgotten by time, privileging them

³⁴ Ibid., 22.

³⁵ Ibid., 30.

with an Edenic purity while erasing their claim to history and civilization. This apparent simplicity and naïveté of the native at once calls up the desire for the conservation of this fragile innocence while paradoxically conjuring the necessity for an education from ignorance.

Lastly, Steiner hints at the role of translation as destructive and supplementary, echoing with Derrida's writing on the dangerous supplement, but attempts to redeem translation through making the distinction between "true" and "false" translation:

The translator invades, extracts, and brings home. The simile is that of the open-cast mine that left an empty scar in the landscape. As we shall see, this despoliation is illusory or is a mark of false translation. Far more interestingly, others have been negated by transfiguration, by an act of appropriative penetration and transfer in excess of the original, more ordered, more aesthetically pleasing. ... I will come back to this paradox of betrayal by augment.³⁶

Comprehension, as its etymology shows, 'comprehends' not only cognitively but by encirclement and ingestion. In the event of interlingual translation this manoeuvre of comprehension is explicitly invasive and exhaustive. Saint Jerome uses his famous image of meaning brought home captive by the translator. We 'break' a code: decipherment is dissective, leaving the shell smashed and the vital layers stripped.³⁷

"True" translations, "pure" translations (acts of translation faithful to the tenants of translation) are generative; "false" translations merely despoil the original. Yet, as Steiner also implies, "false" translation, in despoiling, also "comprehends" the work, albeit through violence. "True" translation might also perform this despoliation, yet Steiner seems to suggest that "true" translation compensates or restitutes for this violence. Translation, it seems, aims to erase the trace of this necessary violence; thus the translator can also engage in "betrayal by augment" – of exceeding or overcompensating so that the mark of the translator is noticeable. Interestingly, Steiner approaches the rhetoric of sacredness without appealing to the divine in his analysis. The

³⁶ Ibid., 298.

³⁷ Ibid., 298.

translator must be faithful; he must complete the restitutive act lest “false” translation occur that mocks the original.

Steiner touches on all the relevant components of Babel that we will be discussing, while also introducing the difficulties in analysis and writing about Babel without entering into the rhetoric one is critiquing. Outlining the Biblical tale of Babel (and the promised restitution of the Pentecost) and Steiner’s extensive analysis of the metaphor of Babel sets the stage for the introduction of Derrida into this dialogue.

Derrida and Babel

I do not know how far we can speak of the modernity of Joyce, but if this exists, beyond the apparatus for postal and programophonic technologies, it is linked to the declared project of keeping generations of university scholars at work for centuries of babelian edification, which must itself have been drawn up using a technological model and the division of university labor that could not be of former centuries. The scheme of bending vast communities of readers and writers to this law, to detain them by means of an interminable transference chain of translation and tradition, can equally be well attributed to Plato and Shakespeare, to Dante and Vico, without mentioning Hegel and other finite divinities.

- Jacques Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear say yes in Joyce"

"Babel" as the Proper Name

Derrida names Babel as "first a proper name, granted"³⁸ when he opens in his essay "Des Tours De Babel." The confusions generated around the movement of the proper name touch on the various components of Babel: the structural confusion that ensues in attempting to locate multiple meanings on a single word "Babel," the double bind that the proper name ensures, the problem of the proper name as being tied to life/death, and the name as the signature, the stamp and the seal.

Derrida writes of "Babel":

...in a tongue within which the proper name of Babel could also, by confusion, be translated by "confusion." The proper name Babel, as a proper name, should remain untranslatable, but, by a kind of associative confusion that a unique tongue rendered possible, one thought it translated in that very tongue, by a common noun signifying what we translate as confusion.³⁹

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours De Babel" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 104.

³⁹ Ibid., 104-105.

Confusion is both necessary in and generated in locating multiple meanings onto the name “Babel”; “the signification of “confusion” is confused, at least double.”⁴⁰ Attempting to build a Babel paradoxically rubblizes.

Babel, as a proper name, resists translation, but also can be translated as “gate of God” and “confusion.”⁴¹ This bind on translation (both to translate and not to translate in order to remain “true” to meaning) generates confusion that instead obscures. This ensuing confusion creates the double bind of Babel. The status of the word as the proper name is an interdict to the reader not to translate the word: in order to maintain its integrity as a proper name, the text must remain impenetrable, untranslated. Yet, the desire to understand, to penetrate, to unveil nonetheless remains, though to do so is to cause irreparable damage to that which is being translated. Once translated, once meaning has been inscribed, the proper name is forced into an economy of meaning both in excess and in deficit of its “original” meaning.

The double bind of the proper, possessing both the drive to be translated and the injunction not to be translated, is associated with life. In the analysis of the apocalyptic, a point I will return to later, truth, as tied to revelation, is bound to the act of translation and unveiling. The apocalyptic itself is bound to this duality of life (of restitution and cure) and death (of dismemberment and decay). Thus the double bind creates a revenant, a haunting – a grotesque surplus of life in death. Derrida writes on this force and vitality of the name in “The Eyes of Language”:

The name does not have the grammatical value of the substantive; it signifies the power of naming, of calling in general... On the ground of the internal reading to which I am here trying to keep, this thinking of the name has to be linked, it seems to me, to this thought of the spectral and of haunting which obsesses this confession. There is a specter

⁴⁰ Ibid., 105.

⁴¹ Ibid.

because there is language, a language which names, calls, summons [*convoque*], invokes. Language can haunt because names, first of all, haunt our sentences. Names are neither present nor absent in these sentences, neither perceptible nor imperceptible, nor hallucinated either.⁴²

This “haunting” occurs because of the resistance names present in language. Names present themselves to be translated, to not be translated. This double bind where the name cannot be, yet demands to be resolved in language thus causes the name to have neither presence nor absence. The “ghostly” nature of the name relates the proper name to the vitalist metaphor. The name, as the un-dead, is constantly generative in defying “proper” boundaries between absence and presence, life and death. It is “un-killable” in its surplus.

This surplus added to by how the proper name also “calls, summons, invokes.” The property of “calling” that the proper name possesses converges with the quality of imminence possessed by the apocalyptic revelation, a quality I will discuss in the section on the apocalyptic. The name, while the location of an untranslatable surplus, generates surplus through the imminence of its invocation – summoning and suggesting while not fully actualizing that which it summons.

Derrida continues his discussion with the figure of the proper name in *Otobiographies: The Ear of the Other* by examining how the name is tied to generation:

[Nietzsche] advances behind a plurality of masks or names that, like any mask and even any theory of the simulacrum, can propose and produce themselves only by returning a constant yield of protection, a surplus value in which one may still recognize the ruse of life. However, the ruse starts incurring losses as soon as the surplus value does not return again to the living, but to and in the name of names, the community of masks.⁴³

⁴² Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 213.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name” in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Avital Ronell, ed. Christie V. McDonald. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 7.

The proper name at first glance seems allied to life and the generative movement which produces surplus, but also, consistent with the complications of the double bind, lies in the borderline between the living and the non-living, absence and presence. The generative surplus that is seemingly bound to life instead accrues to the simulacrum: the mockery or falsehood of life. The revenant as a mockery of life resonates with this reading of the proper name: like life, but not of life.

Relevant to this discussion is the proper name as a sort of stamp, a signature, a seal – an idea that Scholem and Derrida bring up in “The Eyes of Language” and “Des Tours de Babel” respectively:

Friederich Nietzsche – the identity he lays claim to here is not his by right of some contract drawn up with his contemporaries. It has passed to him through the unheard-of contract he has drawn up with himself. He has taken out a loan with himself and *has implicated us in this transaction through what, on the force of a signature, remains his text.*⁴⁴

The signature is a stamp of a personality, implying uniqueness and an agency that vitiates this force. Moreover, Derrida implies that the signature has a self-contained, self-referential force – a closed system that nonetheless encompasses others in its system. Nietzsche’s “loan” is not a contract with his contemporaries; he claims his identity through his own agency. Yet others are implicated in it; even without participation in a contract, others associate Nietzsche’s signature with his identity. A forging of the signature might occur, but calls into being a sense of falsehood within a moral system – the mockery, the forgery, the simulacrum, the outsider. The signature as the stamp or the seal is that which resists translation, duplication, supplementation – and marks identity and ownership. One might then make the connection between the signature and the proper name, which share the property of uniqueness and irreducibility.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

Returning to the “The Eyes of Language,” God’s curse is read by Derrida as the stamp, the signature of God on Babel. God’s signature on the Babel-event is in mirrored opposition to the tribe of Shem’s attempt to “make a name [for themselves]” by building the tower. One might expand the notion of Babel as exemplar of the proper name by also implicating Babel as the signature into the debate. Instead of Babel as the city becoming a monument of the tribe of Shem’s work, a civilized space signed with the tribe’s identity and as a celebration of the power of a universal language, Derrida instead explicates the scenario: “God, the God, would have marked with his patronym a communal space, that city where understanding is no longer possible.”⁴⁵ The signature of God renders the transparency of the originary language opaque (while marking his ownership of language), but also prevents the signature of the tribe of Shem from being enforced on the world through a “colonial violence” – just as the proper name itself resists translation (an opacity of meaning), and in the act of translation confounds and confuses:

In seeking to “make a name for themselves,” to found at the same time a universal tongue and a unique genealogy, the Semites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify a colonial violence (since they would thus universalize their idiom) and a peaceful transparency of the human community. Inversely, when God imposes and opposes his name, he ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism.⁴⁶

The signature, that which is proper and exemplifies what properly identifies a person, is thus found not only in the authorial signature of Nietzsche, but also in attempt by the Semites to “make a name for themselves” as well as in the stamp of God in the Babelic act.

Through this, Derrida connects the proper to that of sequencing and history:

To date is to sign. And to “date from” is also to indicate the place of the signature. This page is in a way dated because it says “today” and today is “my birthday,” the

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours De Babel” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 105.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

anniversary of my birth. The anniversary is the moment when the year turns back on itself, forms a ring or annulus with itself, annuls itself and begins anew.⁴⁷

How can one situate the advent of an auto-biographical *recit* which, as the thought of the eternal return, requires that we let the advent of all events come about in another way? This difficulty crops up wherever one seeks to make a *determination*: in order to date an event, of course, but also in order to identify the beginning of a text, the origin of life, or the first movement of a signature. These are all problems of the borderline.⁴⁸

In stamping the signature, or the date, one places a temporal determination upon the object. Thus, the proper name generates an origin. Yet as Derrida implies in his discussion of the anniversary, the stamping of a date does not only create a definitive origin, but presents itself as a cycle within the human conception of keeping time – a revolution in both senses of the word. The idea of the revolution will be returned to in the discussion of restitution and generation, but perhaps it will suffice to note that the revolution is both restitutive and generative.

The stamping of the name as the signature requires a force behind it. A modification of this discussion of the proper name and the act of stamping the signature might be that of the seal. The seal is to stamp with a motif as like a signature, but also to enclose and to contain. Scholem uses figure of the seal in discussing the secularizing of Hebrew. Sacred language, the language of God, envelops within itself an abyss; as Derrida writes, “To open a name is to find in it not something, but rather something like an abyss, the abyss as the thing itself. Faced with this power, once we have awakened it, we must recognize our impotence.”⁴⁹ The name seals and contains within itself a power greater than Man; to unseal is to unleash a castrating, dismembering catastrophe against the opener. The implication, again, is that the name is

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name” in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Avital Ronell, ed. Christie V. McDonald. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 214.

possessed by a force, but complicates it by also implying that this force is contained through the name. When God “imposes and opposes his name,” he seals the colonial violence of the Semites through a containing confusion. This stroke of violence at once is catastrophic death and an assurance of life.

The Life (and Death) of Language

The rhetoric of life in many of these texts is very much entangled with the rhetoric of sacredness. That which is profane threatens contamination of physical and spiritual health, causing decay and death. However, I will attempt to address life specifically in this section.

Perhaps the easiest path into the rhetoric of life in language is Walter Benjamin’s argument that language possesses life. Life is measured by the possession of “history”. As he writes,

The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. The philosopher’s task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history. And indeed, is not the continued life of works of art far easier to recognize than the continual life of animal species?⁵⁰

Language, art and literature, having history, thus possess life. Having established that art possesses life, Benjamin states the purpose of translation is to exalt the original: “the life of the originals attains in [its translations] its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering.”⁵¹

Derrida explicates Benjamin’s argument when he states that “translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself.”⁵² Translation, and thus language, is implicated in this growth that is like (but not of) the biological. Derrida’s

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 71.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵² Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours De Babel” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 121.

examines Benjamin's analogy of content and language as akin of the fruit and its skin.⁵³ Derrida extends this argument of language as life: "they belong to an organic whole, and it is not insignificant that the metaphor here be vegetal and natural, naturalistic."⁵⁴ Benjamin makes the distinction between the fruit and skin as the whole of the original, and the language of translation as enveloping "its content like a royal robe with ample folds."⁵⁵ Derrida acknowledges the distinction between the two, noting that the difference is "precisely that of artifice to nature."⁵⁶ The cape, Benjamin notes, "signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien."⁵⁷ Yet Derrida extends the metaphor: it is the royal cape of translation that "is the index of power and of the power to lay down the law" for underneath the cape, the king is naked.⁵⁸ The original and the translation are joined by reciprocal relationship. Only through translation can the original grow; only through the original can translation be birthed. The language of the original and the language of translation, while distinct as the figure of the king and the royal cape, are also connected as a natural unity.

Scholem takes the life of language in a different direction. Scholem's text is a letter to Franz Rosenzweig, confessing his fear of the secularization of the Hebrew language that "had been systematically undertaken in Palestine from the beginning of the century."⁵⁹ As Derrida recounts in his interpretation of Scholem's letter, Scholem is a Zionist, but "cannot but recognize

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 75.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours De Babel" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 124.

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 75.

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours De Babel" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 125.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 75.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours De Babel" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 125-126.

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 191.

in Zionism an *evil*, an inner evil, an evil that is anything but accidental.”⁶⁰ Derrida paraphrases this evil as the following:

...the “actualization” of the Hebrew language, its modernization, the transformation undertaken since the beginning of the century (Ben Yehuda) and pursued systematically toward adapting biblical Hebrew to the needs of everyday communication, be it technical and national, but also, for a modern nation, international and interstate communication. This linguistic evil does not let itself be localized or circumscribed. It does not only affect one means of communication precisely because it degrades into a means of communication a language originally or essentially destined for something the medium...⁶¹

To explicate the substance of Scholem’s letter, Hebrew is a sacred language, and the secular Hebrew is “not newly created, but taken of the “good old” treasure is full to bursting.”⁶² That is, Hebrew, already full of sacred meanings, is “modernized.” In “actualizing” this sacred language, this sacred language, overflowing with meaning, is let out for common use on the streets and in “writings and newspapers.”⁶³ This secular use is an outrage; those who speak it are “lying to themselves or to God that this means nothing” for the belief that “language has been secularized, that its apocalyptic thorn has been pulled out” is “surely not true.”⁶⁴ The power of language is real; Scholem fears that “after invoking the ancient names daily, we can no longer hold off their power. Called awake, they will appear since we have invoked them with great violence.”⁶⁵ Scholem ends his letter with a prayer – “may the carelessness [of those who called the Hebrew language back to life], which has led us to this apocalyptic path, not bring about our ruin.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Ibid., 194.

⁶¹ Ibid., 194-195.

⁶² Gershom Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 227.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

If the outrage and profanation of sacred language invites the apocalyptic, then language must possess a vitiating force in order to avenge itself: “After invoking the ancient names daily, we can no longer hold off their power.”⁶⁷ Derrida draws this presupposition out in his examination of Scholem: “In order for it to take the initiative of thus avenging itself, language has to be someone; I am not saying a subject, but it must be speech [*la parole*] speaking in the name of someone, bearing the name of someone: obviously the speech and name of God.”⁶⁸ Sacred language either contains an inherent life, or it is imbued with life through an association with the sacred.

If language does possess life, then what is the implication for “actualizing” or “secularizing” language? Benjamin hints at a possible interpretation of “actualization” in the context of translation, in that “at least it points the way to this region: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages,” “transplant[ing] the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering.”⁶⁹ “Actualizing,” then, seems to tie the meaning of the original to what is more definitive, less free floating – a movement that makes meaning concrete by binding it by a “rendering.” The embodiment of the non-definitive into the concrete might then be associated with Scholem’s “actualization,” where Hebrew is used in the newly formed Zionist state as the national language. The movement of Hebrew from a “dead,” “sacred” language only spoken in temples to a language that is mobilized for international communication, and that is spoken in the streets and written in newspapers – that is actualization and secularization, which makes the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 211.

⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 75.

language “inexpressive, vacant, degraded and corrupted.”⁷⁰ Hebrew, in becoming physical is emptied of its presence, which Scholem derides as a “revenant.” The dichotomies which emerge from the secularizing/actualizing act point to a distinction between the physical/profane and the sacred/divine, and that travel from one point to another is possible. While Benjamin interprets the violence that attends translation as enabling growth – a movement that is both organic and sublime, Scholem views the act of “translating” sacred Hebrew for secular use as an outrage – a profane overstuffing and emptying of the language that invites disaster.

Examining Scholem more closely helps explicate this opposing position. Scholem, in his letter, fears the implications of “adapting biblical Hebrew to the needs of everyday communication, be it technical and national, but also, for a modern nation, international and interstate communication.”⁷¹ Scholem attacks the secularization of a sacred language for conventional usage by employing the rhetoric of life and death – the “resuscitation” of Hebrew for national use. “They believed, thoughtlessly, that they were going to “resuscitate,” to reanimate the language of origin in a modern world and in a modern state.”⁷² Derrida explicates Scholem’s categorization of the state of life and death in language in the following passage:

As sacred, Hebrew was both a dead language - as a language one didn’t or shouldn’t speak in daily life – and a language more living than what is generally called a living language. The new *Sprachbewegung* resuscitates this living dead reserved for study and prayer and only brings it out of the temple or funerary vault for a sinister masquerade, this quasi Esperanto or Volapük, as if the return to life were only a simulacrum for which one was going to disguise the dead as a caricature of itself for the *funeral home*, a nonlanguage, the frozen grin of semiotics, a disincarnated, fleshless, and formally universal exchange value, an instrument in the commerce of signs, without a proper place, without a proper name, a false return to life, a shoddy resurrection.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 216.

⁷¹ Ibid., 194.

⁷² Ibid., 206.

⁷³ Ibid., 209-210

The “life” of language then appears to be implicated in human usage, and secular life. If we were to return to the notion of history enabling life, then perhaps this is an exchange of one history for another – or, perhaps a movement of that which is *outside* of history into history. As Fyler notes, “the less experimentally inclined patristic and medieval commentators are nearly unanimous in their view that Hebrew was the language that Adam spoke, and the sole language prior to Babel.”⁷⁴ While Scholem not necessarily would have held such a view, Fyler’s scholarship nonetheless speaks to the special position of Hebrew as a sacred language. Such a language would possess history stretching back to the Fall; to change and secularize it would be to sacrifice this history for the history of everyday usage, of newspapers and radio. Such an exchange would be a cutting short, a castration of the life that derives from history. Perhaps more persuasively, the proximity of sacred Hebrew to the Word means that it is *beyond* history because of its sacredness. While the Hebrew that Scholem speaks of is meant to be in stasis, a kind of death (presumably to maintain this history/sacredness), the sacredness of Hebrew gives Hebrew a life in excess of living languages:

Here is a dead language, which in truth was not dead but *surviving*, living over and above what one calls a living language, a language that one pretends to resuscitate by giving it this masked body, this gesticulation of an Esperantist masquerade...⁷⁵

To “return” Hebrew to a life of human use is to dismantle its sacredness. As Derrida paraphrases Scholem, the infinite of the sacred is profaned by the attribution of a common commercial value to it: “we have transformed the infinite value attached to a sacred thing into a commercial value.”⁷⁶ To give Hebrew life in the secular realm, to attempt to reconstitute a prior life of common usage, is to cause violence against its current state – to trade one kind of life for another, to create

⁷⁴ John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39.

⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 210.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

a simulacrum in its place— a shoddy copy, a bad translation of the original. Derrida’s response to Scholem’s decriing of this translation of sacred into the commercial is to point out that “the enormous problematic of the analogy between linguistic sign and monetary sign would here graft itself legitimately.”⁷⁷ Monetary value does not accord to either secular or sacred word. Derrida also notes “the problematic of fetishism”:

Unfortunately, the “logic” of fetishism being what it is, one no longer knows who is fetishizing the sacred language, whether it is those whom Scholem implicitly accuses of idolatry or the accuser who wants the sacred signifiers to remain out of commerce, dedicating a cult to them that keeps them safe from all current trade, even from all exchange. In the Enlightenment tradition here prepared by Spinoza, there can be no doubt that the main accused would be Scholem.⁷⁸

The issue of fetishism is of interest in the dual strategies that its advocates would take to “protect” the “life” of sacred language. For those who would secularize language, language must be “resuscitated,” to be returned to current use in order to survive; Scholem would instead keep language “dead” in order to maintain its “life.”

Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche in “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name” implies a similar configuration of life/death in Nietzsche’s text. The division between life and death is broached early on in Derrida’s text. As Derrida writes, “A discourse on life/death must occupy a certain space between *logos* and *gramme*, analogy and program, as well as between the differing senses of program and reproduction. And since life is on the line, the trait that relates the logical to the graphical must also be working between the biological and the biographical, the thanatological and thanatographical.”⁷⁹ The discussion of life/death is contained between the logical and the graphical, between speech and writing.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name” in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Avital Ronell, ed. Christie V. McDonald. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 4-5.

Perhaps a discussion of speech and writing would be best addressed by a recount of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, but in the interest of space perhaps let it be said in passing that Derrida's critique of the speech-writing dichotomy as logocentrism, the favoring of speech-as-presence over writing-as-supplement as part of the Western metaphysical tradition, informs the analysis that follows.

In his discussion of Nietzsche's work, Derrida writes on how language possesses a body, a vitality that is associated with the maternal. "The law of the mother, as language, is a "domain" [*Gebiet*], a living body not to be "sacrificed" or given up [*preisgeben*] dirt-cheap. The expression "*sich preisgeben*" can also mean to give or abandon oneself for a nominal fee, even to prostitute oneself."⁸⁰ This life is at odds with the paternal which is associated with the dead – "history or historical science, which puts to death or treats the dead, which deals or negotiates with the dead, is the science of the father."⁸¹ One might think on how Benjamin's proposal that life derives from history squares with the association of history with the dead. Perhaps the existence of "the dead past," of history unchangeable, implies a vital present/presence. This then posits a temporal continuum where life travels one-way into death, distinguishing between the vital act of living (biology) and writing-as-fact-of-life (biography). Death, then, follows life. Yet this sequencing is problematic. Death also retroactively creates life – death-as-history enables the flourishing of life-as-language.

Returning to the question of language - because the body of language possesses this vitality, there is an injunction against its utilization in a purely commercial manner. Such an exchange for that which immeasurably valuable for a "nominal fee" hearkens back to Scholem's

⁸⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁸¹ Ibid.

lamentation of the utilization of sacred Hebrew as a secular language – where that which is sacred reduced to a commercial value. The living body of language is beyond value. Following Scholem’s reasoning that the sacred is that which possesses infinite value, then life seems to confer upon language a “sacredness” equivalent to that possessed by the “dead” language of Scholem’s Hebrew.

Sacredness, in the context of Scholem’s argument, derives from divine authority, as opposed to life seeming to have a more internally generated logic to its being. However, these are nonetheless linked. The outrage of life as resulting in dismemberment and death seems to invite the same punishment and restitutive/retributive act as blasphemy against the sacred. Yet, as Scholem would have it, in mobilizing language to support the secular life of humanity, the original life of the language is damaged, outraged, snuffed out, resurrected in a parody of its prior life. One way of working around this difficulty implies that there is a “true” life and a “false” life, of which sacredness is allied with “true” life. “

How might one distinguish between “true” or “false” life, then? One might induce an answer from Benjamin’s answer to the question of good or bad translation. The life of language is threatened and enabled by translation. Yet translation also is not all created equal. Bad translation profanes and obscures the originating source, while good translation enables the original to grow – not replacing, but instead allowing the “light” of the original language to shine through.⁸² Applied to the question of life, then – this implies that even life must have a kind of “original” meaning. “True” life, while encompassing violence, is ultimately restitutive and enables the generation of the original – the conventional life cycle and propagation, perhaps, but

⁸² Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 79.

all in all implying a separation of the life/death functions. “False” life, in contrast, is death-in-life, or life-in-death – neither dead nor alive; it is the revenant, the ghost. The “ghostly” nature of “false” life returns to the problematic of the proper name in translation and the proper name’s vitiation by a force, an agency.

Sacredness and Profaneness

Language, when it is damaged through ill-use, secularization, modification, is outraged; both the act of damage and what remains are considered profane. While in the Biblical history of language, the divisions of language that enable translation are a reminder of the punishment of Babel, Benjamin’s argument that translation enables the life of language seems to undo the stigma of the profane upon the translating act. Instead, the location of the profane is moved to the potential for damage and death in incomplete or incompetent translation – one might imagine that the profane then is associated with dismemberment. This dichotomy, as illustrated before in the section on life, is problematic in that life appears on both sides of the sacred/profane dichotomy. Nonetheless, we should try to follow the logic of the sacred/profane through an examination of the secularization of language.

Perhaps most illustrative of this dichotomy would be how Derrida’s attempt to formulate how a sacred language would appear to Scholem and what the act of secularizing such a sacred language might look like:

...the sacred language would have to be nonconceptual, noninstrumentalizable, noninformational, noncommunicational, and nontechnological. Technological contamination, equivalent here to secularizing actualization, can only happen to it after the fact, and can only befall it secondarily as an evil...⁸³

⁸³ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 211.

Derrida may be ironic in defining sacred language through negative traits. Interpreting Derrida literally, however, the sacred is associated with the originary, and secularization-as-evil can only occur after the origin. Such evil grants it a limited, profane life in exchange for damage done to its sacredness. It is this very secularization of the sacred language which Scholem fears – that the violence of secularizing the sacred will condemn future generations:

This leads one to think first that to secularize or desacralize is to decapitate the language by removing its point, its sting (*Stanchel*), its apocalyptic thorn. This apocalyptic thorn, this point or this teleological aim would institute the sacredness of language.”⁸⁴

The violence of secularizing might well be associated with the violence of the interpreter or the translator. Scholem’s Hebrew, that sacred tongue of origin, is translated for secular use. Yet the original tongue is not overwritten. This excess of meaning produces Scholem’s fearful scenario: sacred words full with sacred meanings, are spoken for secular use, producing a confusion of meaning. Sacred language is spoken in communication with God – the confusion of meanings garbles unintentional communication to the divine.⁸⁵ The violence of translation and of secularization is also tied with the rhetoric of castration and dismemberment; the “apocalyptic thorn” is pulled out, decapitated. The sacred, then, must be the original, the whole, the healthy – but also the vengeful force that seeks retribution against those who would profane language. Profanation seems to retroactively create the sacred.

Moreover, attempts at dismemberment have “only occulted or denied. But by doing so, they have confirmed that the apocalyptic persisted, at once cryptic and occulted, ready to reappear, to return. It is no longer perceptible to the present, by definition, and the occultation,

⁸⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁸⁵ Gershom Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 227.

the cryptic veil is its very phenomenality, its state and efficiency.”⁸⁶ In holding the apocalyptic in abeyance, the uncertainty through which the apocalyptic derives its power is paradoxically strengthened.

As Derrida notes, the secularization of Hebrew cannot be fully possible if sacred language is to maintain its retributive efficacy.⁸⁷ Thus, while it seems possible to profane the sacred, to cause damage, sacredness cannot be fully killed or dismembered if one should expect an apocalyptic retribution at its profanation. The sacredness seems to possess, then, a sublime character – it can be constantly outraged and damaged without loss to its potency to vengeance, yet can nonetheless be “wholly” sacrificed through the act of secularization. Moreover, to outrage, to kill, to sacrifice the sacred would be to perform “that by which and in which the sacred can be called sacred and emerge as such.”⁸⁸ The sacred can only become the sacred through this outrage – the sacrifice of the sacred unlocks its apocalyptic potential that “completes” it as the sacred.

This sacrifice of the language, as Scholem would have it, degrades it to a “Volapük.” “Volapük,” in the context of Scholem’s letter, thus defines a language emptied of its fullness, a language that has henceforth become a nonlanguage, but this negativity remains haunted; is not an absolute negative negativity. The shoddy translation of the sacred is despoliation, profane, exploitive. The “ghostly Volapük” remains inhabited by the *revenant*, wrought by the haunting that permeates, as Derrida notes, the entire text.⁸⁹ The neither fully dead nor fully alive-ness of the revenant is a profanity; it cuts against conventionally defined borders of life and death that

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 205.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

are set by divine authority. The excess of being inhabited by the ghost is a further sacrilege – a mockery of “proper” life. Sacredness, then, Scholem suggests, can only exist without violence or violation in a purely restitutive economy. Conversely, Derrida’s reading of Scholem suggests that the sacred can only exist *through* violation, profanation.

The use of Hebrew as a secular medium, as a language for international exchange, a “nonlanguage in which or *to* which the sacred language – the only language that speaks – is sacrificed”⁹⁰ then speaks to the proliferation of other nonlanguages. Volapük and Esperanto, both artificial languages, are referenced in Scholem’s letter. Hebrew is transformed into the artificial (as opposed to the natural, the organic). Other examples where language is modified or transformed to fit the needs of the secular might include I.A. Richards and Ogden’s Basic International English or Orwell’s Newspeak – language becomes a tool for the furthering of the empire or the state, a fate that Scholem fears for Hebrew.

This logic is touched on in *The Ear of the Other*. As a disclaimer to this literal reading of Nietzsche, this is Nietzsche read not “as a philosopher (of being, of life, or death) or as a scholar or scientist, if these three types can be said to share the abstraction of the bio-graphical and the claim to leave their lives and names out of their writing. For the moment, [Derrida] shall read Nietzsche beginning with the scene from *Ecce Homo* where he puts his body and his name out front even though he advances behind masks or pseudonyms without proper names.”⁹¹ The question of the forging of the signature, of the mask and the pseudonym in contrast to or backed by the proper name, is raised by this disclaimer, but is a question we must leave in the interest of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 217.

⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name” in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Avital Ronell, ed. Christie V. McDonald. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 7.

sacredness. Returning to the question of the sacred – the sacred is outraged, and the return to “good taste” or “what is proper” must be performed:

By nature, everyone nowadays writes and speaks the German tongue as poorly and vulgarly as is possible in the era of journalistic German: that is why the nobly gifted youth should be taken by force and placed under a bell-jar [*Glasglocke*] of good taste and severe linguistic discipline. If this proves impossible, I would prefer a return to spoken Latin because I am ashamed of a language so disfigured and so profaned....⁹²

Nietzsche’s passage seems to presage Scholem. This return, dependant on language “mistreated” because it is spoken “vulgarly” in an era of “journalistic German,” invokes the same concerns that Scholem has for the use of Hebrew in the secular realm, where the sacred is profaned by use by the State.

Such a return to a purer speech premised on the “mistreatment” of language operates on two assumptions. First, the need for such a return is created through vulgarization, thus assuming that there are standards and codes for proper use of language. Such standard is laid down, even imposed, by a higher agency. Such a law is complicit with a kind of verticality where toppling or deviating from the path can only lead to a shattering, a disfigurement, and a castration of the mother language. Second, that a return to a purer, untainted language (Latin, in this case) is even possible must be assumed. Occulting or denying history speaks to the rhetoric of the instant – the desire for a return to timelessness; the notion of nostalgia for the pre-Babelic. Moreover, such an occlusion of history must be conducted with a necessary violence that cuts and isolates (“taken by force and placed under a bell-jar of good taste and severe linguistic discipline”).

In the case of Scholem, this source of contamination is the secular as the technological, and the fantasy of the purer language is the Hebrew kept for use in temples which is being

⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, “Second Lecture,” quoted in Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name” in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Avital Ronell, ed. Christie V. McDonald. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 21.

translated and damaged through this contaminating intervention. Yet, as Derrida points out, the secular as the technological (for Scholem's Hebrew is outraged through the intervention of science and in the name of progress) is not necessarily opposed to the sacred; it is a false dichotomy. The technological has a history of being associated with Christian spiritual interiority. As Derrida writes on the difficulties of maintaining this dialectic:

...the dissociation between originary and technological language- and therefore the implicit devalorization of technology as profanatory, secularizing, contaminating exteriority- also aims at a Christian idealism, an interiorization of spiritual meaning separated from the body in general, from time, from the letter or the carnal signifier. According to a law that can be regularly verified, technicism would be on the same side as idealism- in its entire tradition, up to Hegel and beyond- and as Christian interiority.⁹³ If the technological is on the same side as the originary language, then Scholem's argument is rendered problematic. The technological, no longer in opposition and external to the originary, can no longer contaminate the originary as an external evil.

A second reading of the sacred might be derived from Walter Benjamin's imagining of a solution to the problem of translation. Translation is enabled by sacred language; without it "meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language."⁹⁴ Sacred language occurs where a "text is identical with truth or dogma, where it is supposed to be "the true language" in all its literalness and without the mediation of meaning, this text is unconditionally translatable."⁹⁵ The moment of sacred language in the text allows translation without condition or restraint. This language seems remarkably similar to the Pentecostal language, externally imposed, which is immediately legible to readers in the truth of the Word through their own languages. Yet, if as Benjamin writes, translation is "vouchsafed to

⁹³ Jacques Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 211.

⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 82.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Holy Writ alone,”⁹⁶ then how can “bad” translation, that which opens up possibility for contamination and profanation, be possible? Derrida’s analysis of Scholem seems to point to a sacredness, a life that cannot completely die (lest it lose its “apocalyptic sting”), but nonetheless can be outraged through mortal agency and shoddy work.

The outrage of life and sacredness appeals to a greater code of justice, calling out for a restitutive/retributive act that will correct the balance. An explication of such an act and difficulties inherent in such an act follows.

Restitution, Generation / Revolution, Overturning

Babel itself appears to be an act of restitution – the fragmentation of language is the consequence of the moral deficit from challenging the divine. The Pentecost, in this manner, is also a kind of restitutive act. The shattering of language is repaired, returned to wholeness through the imposition of the missing unifier. The restitutive act must be contrasted with the generative act. Restitution implies that there is an original state whereby balance can be returned. It also implies a certain arbitration is present in determining what compensation is sufficient, whereby the restitution itself ends. Thus restitution is bound by a kind of positivism as well as bracketed by an origin and an ending. The generative act, on the other hand, is ceaseless in its increase, and carries the implication of life. This life, though, denies the ordering between birth and death that restitution carries – it is a life beyond death, an un-dead life, a life regenerating beyond natural order.

Most pertinent to this discussion would be Derrida’s critique of Scholem in “The Eyes of Language,” and is bound up in his discussion of “sacredness” and the act of restitution. Derrida’s

⁹⁶ Ibid.

explication of Scholem's letter seems to lead towards the conclusion that the profane restitution carried out by Zionists is at once impossible to complete (for the apocalyptic thorn can only be occulted or denied) and seems to command a secondary restitutive act of vengeance against those who would profane the sacred. Yet this secondary restitution, of linguistic violence met with retributive violence, is itself in violation of the act of restoring – it goes beyond the bounds set for it: “The illogical logic of vengeance, as soon as it goes through language, cannot let itself be contained, and therefore comprehended, within the limits of individual responsibility.”⁹⁷ The attempted act of restitution (or the restoration back to what once was) thus seems to spiral out into an excessive generation of repercussions, growing beyond the possibly imagined origin. The implication is that the opposition between the restitutive act and the generative act breaks down – the retributive (associated with the restitutive) must possess an excess of violence to “complete” itself.

This discussion of restoration and returning in contrast to an excess or lack through the lenses of restitution / generation might be applied specifically to the word “revolution.” Scholem warns against “this inescapable revolution of the language [*diese unausbleibliche Revolution der Sprache*].”⁹⁸ Revolution occupies two possible meanings: the first refers to a turning, as in the turning of a circle or a wheel. A full revolution means a return to a starting point, a reference to a cyclical motion. The second meaning is that of the political. A political revolution is the *overturning* and an eradication of an existing government or system, and a setting of a new order in its place. The doubling of the word “revolution” concerns the treatment of Hebrew in its secularization – the return to a “dead” language is enacted in order to find a tongue for the new

⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 207.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

Zionist order. This excess of meaning, of a single word occupying multiple meanings, seems to cut to the core of Scholem's lamentations. Sacred language possesses an original meaning; Scholem fears both that the secularization of these words cannot completely rewrite or empty out these meanings or "pull out their apocalyptic thorns," so that "to hear and to say the words, to listen to them, all of this constitutes one and the same experience, one that renews the covenant. Then one will have to submit to the law of the language in which the form of the word will no longer be, will in truth never have been separated from its meaning."⁹⁹ After all, it is "impossible to empty out words filled to bursting, unless it be the sacrifice of language itself."¹⁰⁰ The war of secular/sacred meanings again returns to the idea of restitution – the restitutive act is not made complete, instead being constantly caught up with the excess generation of meaning which is not sufficient to complete a revolution in either sense.

This insufficiency of the act of secularization is such that the act is neither restitution nor generation, neither dead nor alive, is picked up later in *The Ear of the Other*. Indeed, Derrida writes how "not only is the State marked by the sign and the paternal figure of the dead, it also wants to pass itself off for the mother – that is, for life, the people, the womb of things themselves."¹⁰¹ In "The Eyes of Language," the return to Hebrew as the symbol of the new Zionist state is meant to be an act of generation and restitution. But the occupancy of both in the figure of Zionist Hebrew produces a "shoddy resurrection" - a revenant that possesses a paradoxical lack and excess of life in its un-death.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 223.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 221.

¹⁰¹ Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name" in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Avital Ronell, ed. Christie V. McDonald. (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 34.

The combination of restitution and generation which ironically perform neither of these functions results in their inversion, that is, loss and degeneration. “The act of destruction destroys only that which, being already degenerated, offers itself selectively to annihilation. The expression “degeneration” designates both the loss of vital, genetic, or generous forces and the loss of *kind*, either species or genre: the *Entartung*.”¹⁰²

In short, the engineering of languages into tools of the state or empire speak to two alternatives that are bound to the Babel paradigm. The first is the secular enactment of the Pentecost, where the fragmentation of Babel is erased through a language that unites the scattered tribes of mankind. Such an outcome is progressive, offering hope and possible redemption. The second is the resuscitation of Scholem’s revenant, a “ghostly Volapük,” a botched resurrection that can only bring disaster and the apocalyptic. Both outcomes are tied to the restitutive act – in the first case, the restitutive act is performed perfectly, restoring a lost equilibrium or balance, while in the second case, such an act is performed imperfectly. To appropriate Steiner’s words, such an act is another “lunatic tower launched at the stars,” an invitation of God’s vengeance that can only spiral out into a generative cycle of mounting excesses and lack. Scholem’s promise of a vengeance that defies generational boundaries or the logic of justice is an example of the consequences of the second, though his prayer that “the carelessness, which has led [the Zionists] to this apocalyptic path, not bring about our ruin”¹⁰³ suggests that the apocalyptic brings with it the uncertainty of either salvation (and the promise of a sacred Pentecost) or catastrophe. While not necessarily opposed, both alternatives employ the

¹⁰² Ibid., 27.

¹⁰³ Gershom Scholem, “Confession on the Subject of Our Language” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 227.

rhetoric of the fragment – the first as reparation, the second as the threat of even further division and fragmentation.

The Fragment and the Supplement

Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy withhold a clear definition of the fragment; as they write, “in the case of the fragment, no definition exists.”¹⁰⁴ Perhaps to translate and interpret, not without violence, the figure of the fragment, we shall start with a provisional definition (though Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy later write on how the fragment defies definition). The Oxford English Dictionary defines *fragment*-as-noun as “1. a part broken off or otherwise detached from a whole; a broken piece; a (comparatively) small detached portion of anything,” and “2. a detached, isolated, or incomplete part; a (comparatively) small portion of anything; a part remaining or still preserved when the whole is lost or destroyed.”¹⁰⁵ This definition of the fragment shall serve for now in exploring productive parallels and distinctions between the fragment and the supplement.

Derrida’s writing on the dangerous supplement complements the reading of the fragment in the figure of Babel. The supplement is denigrated as less than the original, and has the strong implication of incompleteness. However, a distinction can be made between the supplement and the fragment, though the two are connected. The supplement exists outside the original and adds to the (still extant) original; the fragment was once part of the original and is symptomatic of a kind of trauma that shattered the now lost original. The supplement does add to the discussion, though, because the debate on translation that happens within the context of Babel divides

¹⁰⁴ Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), 63.

¹⁰⁵ Fragment, *n*. The Oxford English Dictionary. Accessed 26 April, 2009 at: http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50089350?query_type=word&queryword=fragment

between translation as the fragment and translation as the supplement. As Steiner and Benjamin argue, translation supplements the original by allowing the growth of the original. In the tradition of Babel, the fragments of the original language (which necessitate translation) imply that translation is a kind of punishment from a higher authority that Man must bear. Derrida's reading of the supplement can only supplement our reading of the fragment (though also threatening replacement by illustrating the insufficiency of this reading – the fragment itself defying definition). Therefore, the examination of the fragment will be chiefly assisted by a reading of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* as an explication of the mechanics of the fragment. The tale of Babel is a story about the fragmentation of language from the Adamic tongue into the confusion of multiple languages, and the offered hope of the repair of shattered language. Thus, *The Literary Absolute*'s explication on how the fragment operates might illuminate avenues where we might think about Babel and its "curse" of fragmentation.

The Literary Absolute, as a matter of introduction and disclaimer, does not address the Babelic fragment specifically. As the translators of the *The Literary Absolute* write:

Although the problems inherent in the literature-philosophy distinction are an integral part of philosophy from Plato on, it is nonetheless only after Kant that "Literature" can be posited and can posit itself as such. To understand the question of literature in this manner is to clearly enter into a reconsideration of the moment of romanticism, and to rethink the romantico-modern concept of literature that it inaugurates.

The Literary Absolute is a study of the initial appearance of this concept of literature in the texts of the Jena romantics. As its subtitle indicates, it proposes an analysis of the "theory of literature in German romanticism."¹⁰⁶

Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy recognize as render problematic the study of the *romantic* in *The Literary Absolute*. They distinguish between the *romantic* as the "classic usage of the period...

¹⁰⁶ Phillippe Barnard and Cheryl Lester, Introduction to *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* by Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), x.

that of Wieland, Goethe, or Schiller”¹⁰⁷ and the term as used by the Jena romantics which “constitutes the *properly indefinite* program of the texts [Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy] will be reading, all of which should be coupled with the irony of Friedrich’s letter to his brother August: “I can hardly send you my explication of the word Romantic because it would take – 125 pages.”¹⁰⁸ In the interest of not derailing this discussion of the fragment into an explication of the proper name of Romantic, let it be said that Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy embrace “such an ironic definition – or the irony of such an absence of definition.”¹⁰⁹ However, as if to add irony to irony, as if to veil somewhat this absence, they announce a provisional definition:

...that will ultimately find no other definition than a place (Jena) and a journal (the *Athenaeum*).
Let us, then, call this romanticism the Athenaeum.
Its initiators, as everyone knows, are the two Schlegel brothers: August Wilhelm and Friedrich.¹¹⁰

While whether “everyone knows” the names of romanticism’s initiators is far from clear, Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy’s project appears as an attempt to trace an origin in an event named by the proper, an act that is not unlike the coherence of the biblical Babel myth. Moreover, the concern of this movement is the search for the *absolute* of literature, and, as Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy note, “also its *ab-solute*, its isolation in its perfect closure upon itself (upon its own organicity.”¹¹¹ This concern with a totality, self-sufficiency, and the implication of completion (and the denial, then, of further growth) implicates the concept of the restitutive as well as the apocalyptic. Yet within the *Athenaeum*, the fragment-as-genre appears. The fragment-as-genre is not immediately identifiable with the Babelic fragment, but nonetheless lends itself to an

¹⁰⁷ Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), 6.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 11

interaction with the notion of the *absolute* that might be transferred with some violence to thinking about the Babelic fragment and the absolute of the lost Adamic tongue.

In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's analysis, the fragment calls confusion upon itself over the issue of intentionality:

Thus a confusion is maintained, and sometimes exploited, between a piece that is struck by incompleteness, let us say, and another that aims at fragmentation for its own sake. A propitious shadow is thus allowed to obscure what this genre essentially implies: the fragment as a determinate and deliberate statement, assuming or transfiguring the accidental and involuntary aspects of fragmentation.¹¹²

The confusion that derives from the intentional and accidental nature of the fragment-as-genre may be denied in the myth of Babel. The fragmentation of language was thought, by St. Augustine and many other biblical commentators, to be an intentional act of divine wrath. Yet the confusion that attends the fragment is nonetheless productive in thinking about Babel, which can be translated as confusion. Babel, held in the field of translation, generates and perhaps exploits the confusion between its multiple meanings and its denial of meaning as a proper name. The similarity between the configuration of Babel and the configuration of the fragment seems to equate Babel with the fragment, or at least the fragment with the proper name.

Yet Babel is also the traumatic shattering that creates the fragment. The excess of meaning contained in "Babel" implies that it is greater than a whole; yet this excess of meaning is arrived at because of Babel's function as the proper and the fragment:

... the fragment functions simultaneously as a remainder of individuality *and* as individuality, which also explains why it was never defined, or why attempts at its definition were contradictory.¹¹³

¹¹² Ibid., 41.

¹¹³ Ibid., 43.

Definition-as-word plays on both clarity of meaning and clarity of outline. Neither can be achieved for the fragment. In this sharpening of image or information, of making distinct through or for interpretation, one might think then of the act of revealing. The veil is lifted; the outline, hinted at, is made clear. From revealing, then, perhaps it is not a stretch to speak of revelation. Revelation is a theme that will be returned to later in the study, but let it suffice to be said that in this manner, the fragment withholds revelation because it remains veiled in confusion. The connection of revelation as the precursor to the apocalyptic seems to suggest that the fragment withholds the apocalyptic as truth, though the fragment also functions as a mark of a catastrophic breaking and dismemberment. The excess of meaning produced by the fragment (which “involves an essential incompleteness”¹¹⁴) also seems to unbind it from being “less than” the original.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy continue to untangle the fragment from its pejorative connotations as something that recalls the traumatic shattering:

If the fragment is indeed a fraction, it emphasizes neither first nor foremost the fracture that produces it. At the very least, it designates the borders of the fracture as an autonomous form as much as the formlessness or deformity of the tearing. But the fragment, a scholarly term, is also a noble term, and we will return to the crucial link between the ancient model and the fragmentary state of many of the texts of Antiquity. The philological fragment, especially in the tradition of Diderot, takes on the value of the *ruin*. Ruin and fragment conjoin the functions of the monument and of evocation; what is thereby both remembered as lost and presented in a sort of sketch (or blueprint) is always the living unity of a great individuality, author, or work.¹¹⁵

The implication for thinking about Babel from this point of view seems to imply that that divine punishment as the fracture that produces fragmentation – that moment of trauma – is not the value of Babel; the fragment is instead a reminder (and remainder) of what was lost – the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

Adamic tongue. This implication lends itself to explication as what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy bizarrely call “logic of the hedgehog”:

Fragmentary totality, in keeping with what should be called the logic of the hedgehog, cannot be situated in any single point: it is simultaneously in the whole and in each point. Each fragment stands for itself and for that from which it is detached. Totality is the fragment itself in its completed individuality. It is thus identically the plural totality of fragments, which does not make up a whole (in, say, a mathematical mode) but replicated the whole, the fragmentary itself, in each fragment.¹¹⁶

Following through with this analysis, the whole and the fragment are not necessarily mutually exclusive; the fragment presents itself as well as the whole. In fact, the fragment is needed in order to achieve a certain kind of “perfection”:

And thus it implies the *dialogue*, that “garland of fragments” (A77), and undoubtedly that perfection of dialogue which becomes the romantic ideal of drama, a hidden but insistent motif that should be traced throughout the *Fragments* in order to extract their particular ideal of natural exchange and its corresponding *natural* staging. The completion of the fragment thus emerges in the absolute, absolutely natural exchange – or change – of thoughts-individuals between individual-thoughts, which is also, within each fragment, the production of this same genuine naturalness as a work of art. The truth of the fragment is not, therefore, entirely in the infinite “progressivity” of “romantic poetry,” but in the actual infinity, by means of the fragmentary apparatus, of the very process of truth.¹¹⁷

Only through the fragment can this ideal of “the actual infinity... of the very process of truth” be realized; only through translation can “true language” be unveiled. The fragment is divorced from the sign of trauma and tragedy, instead becoming the means through which truth becomes complete. Through this completion, the restitutive act asserts itself – the fragment is not “infinitely” progressive, generative. The fragment is supplementary:

The romantic fragment, far from bringing the dispersion or the shattering of the work into play, inscribes its plurality as the exergue of the total, infinite work.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

The fragment adds, completes, stamps the “total, infinite work.” One might investigate the animating force behind the signature of the fragment, but perhaps let it be said here that the signature and stamp of the fragment may also be the seal – that which encloses and contains. The additive element of the fragment segues into Derrida’s conception of the dangerous supplement.

While Derrida mobilizes this figure in Rousseau’s work to critique the privileging of “living” speech over writing, the figure of the dangerous supplement can be mobilized productively for thinking about the Babelic fragment. The supplement can be thought of in two ways (though as Derrida shows, these conceptions of the supplement eventually converge). First, the supplement privileges the whole; it is subservient to it. One might think about the same relationship between the fragment and the whole. The implication is that the original is complete; the supplement is not. Second, the supplement complements the whole; in doing so, it threatens the original by implicating it in incompleteness. The original *needs* the supplement to become complete. The supplement threatens the integrity of the original, thus Rousseau’s naming of it as “that dangerous supplement.” The dangerous supplement is relevant to the discussion of Babel in three ways. First, it recalls the rhetoric of despoliation, violence and dismemberment that runs throughout the components of Babel. Second, its function as that which adds only to replace echoes the threat that secularized or profane language poses towards originary, sacred language. Third, Derrida’s argument that “the sign is always the supplement of the thing itself” is one way we can start thinking productively about Babel as a metaphor for translation.

Derrida discusses the supplement through the analogy of Nature and Man, in the context of Rousseau’s *Dialogues* on the contemplation of Nature:

For in Nature, the plant is the most *natural* thing. It is natural *life*. The mineral is distinguished from the vegetable in that it is a dead and useful Nature, servile to man’s

industry. When man has lost the sense and the taste of true natural riches – plants- he rummages in the entrails of his mother and risks his health... Man has thus put out his eyes, he blinds himself by the desire to rummage in these entrails.¹¹⁹

The act of blinding, of perversion, of despoliation occurs because Man privileges the supplement (mineral wealth) above the original (Nature's bounteous botany); the supplement is valued above the original. One might apply this thinking to the act of translation which is itself a kind of supplementation. The original must be privileged above the supplement; if this order is overturned, then "bad" translation – profanation and contamination - occurs. Derrida further explicates the figure of blindness:

And let us not forget that the violence that takes us toward the entrails of the earth, the moment of mine-blindness, that is, of metallurgy, is the origin of society... Blindness thus produces that which is born at the same time as society: the languages, the regulated substitution of signs for things, the order of the supplement.¹²⁰

The blindness that Derrida speaks of is the inability to perceive the truly valuable original [Nature]; because of this blindness he seeks recourse to the supplement [mining] in order to fill his wants. The connection to civilization, the technology that enables the Babelic building is thus implicated in this blindness, in contrast to the lost bounty of Eden. Man builds already blind, unable to see the imminent divine punishment that will blind him from the Adamic speech through linguistic confusion. As mentioned before, this linguistic confusion creates the space that allows for translation to take place. To add violence to violence, translation itself is a supplement – Man cannot comprehend, apprehend, *see* the original meaning, and thus must resort to translation, despoliation of the original, in order to *see*.

¹¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 148.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

This blindness to imminent punishment is in direct opposition to the figure of revelation and compared immediately to Scholem's letter. Those who would secularize Hebrew know not what they do, yet they are strangely "fortunate" in their blindness:

The blindness of the creators was their "good fortune (*Glück*)," adds Scholem. "For no one clear-sighted would have mustered the demonic courage (*den dämonischen Mut*) to revive a language, there where only an *Esperanto* could emerge."¹²¹

Their blindness births the secular supplement to sacred Hebrew that threatens to overwrite, outrage and reduce this sacred language to the profane. The result can only be a "ghostly *Volapük*." The supplement "adds only to replace, and therein lies the danger."¹²² The figure of the revenant is an outrage because it challenges notions of naturalness and the clear dichotomy of life and death. The revenant that comes from this act of supplementation is both dead and alive – life possessing death, spirit possessing flesh, the undead. One might make the jump to Scholem's use of the revenant in the context of language; the word is then a carnal signifier possessed by an artificial animating force.

Derrida's notion that the sign is always a supplement of the thing itself develops this line of thinking. In the context of Scholem's letter on the secularization of Hebrew, the word is at once emptied and possessed by a secular meaning which does not point to the thing itself (that is, the original sacred meaning). Yet the original sacred meaning can only be supplemented with a secular meaning because it has a certain lack: a language to be used in temples cannot be used without for international communication. Moreover, Hebrew, at least in the biblical tradition, was thought to be closest to the lost Adamic tongue.¹²³ Hebrew, as one step removed from Adamic

¹²¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 209.

¹²² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 145.

¹²³ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* . (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 59.

speech, is itself insufficient. Translation as the supplement fills this insufficiency; it is what we must do because of the curse of Babel. The danger of translation and of secular language is that they do not only add – they replace. Both imply that the original is insufficient; to render translation obsolete or to deny the secular, then is to return to the fantasy of the perfect Eden.

The discussion of the fragment and the supplement is essential to our study of the Babelic configuration. Differences in language enable translation and the need for a common language. Communication between states can only exist when resting on the premise of states as distinct entities. International communication, in the case of the secularization of Hebrew, merges both. Derrida's critique of Scholem and the Zionists as "fetishizing" Hebrew, of projecting upon Hebrew a belief of its (sacred/secular) power, is an invention; it *creates* Hebrew-as-object only through the supplementary charge of their beliefs.

The discussion of the fragment (both linguistic and political) returns to the question of history (which informs, as Benjamin tells us, the question of the life of language) which begins at a single originating point – the concept of fragmented language might be traced to the Babelic Fall. Yet, the supplement, which under a Benjaminian reading might constitute the Babelic fragment because translation is only allowed between fragments, denies an originating point. The question of the bracketing of the language question must be bound up in the temporal aspect of fragmentation. To posit temporality is to posit both an origin and an end.

Of Origins and the Apocalyptic

A discussion of origins and the apocalypse, at the most basic level, speaks to the bracketing of the division of language with Babel and the Pentecost. However, the concern with origins and the apocalyptic link to the other characteristics of the Babel configuration: as mentioned before, restitution requires the temporal aspect of the origin, and the very imposition

of such a framework is a kind of signature that returns to the concept of the double bind of the proper name. Derrida names three components of the apocalyptic in “The Eyes of Language”:
“First the value of revelation or unveiling, the decrypting of what is hidden (*apocalypto*); second, the current meaning of the end of time and the last judgment; third, catastrophe and cataclysm.”¹²⁴ An understanding of origin is thus unveiled by induction; origins are a veiling, an encrypting; the beginning of time; and a state untouched by cataclysm. I will modify Derrida’s components by discussing revelation, confusion and death; the temporal component of the apocalyptic is implicit in the discussion of all three.

Derrida begins by forging a connection between the apocalyptic and revelation.

Revelation is not just the disclosure of divine will to the human, but the literal unveiling of the object:

Apokalupto, I disclose, I uncover, I unveil, I reveal the thing that can be a part of the body, the head or the eyes, a secret part, the sex or whatever might be hidden, a secret, the thing to be dissimulated, a thing that is neither shown nor said, signified perhaps that cannot or *must* not first be delivered up to self-evidence.¹²⁵

What is perhaps most interesting about the act of revelation is that it brings out what was once hidden. Revelation is the removal of the barrier that obscures, or hides. This barrier not only obfuscates, but divides and separates – blocking (and demanding) transmission of the hidden object. As Derrida writes, “And the disclosure not only opens to vision or contemplation, affords not only seeing but also hearing/understanding.”¹²⁶ Revelation thus enables transmission to take place, a transmission that relates to hearing (perhaps the voice of the Other), but also begins the

¹²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 204.

¹²⁵ Jacques Derrida, “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy” in *Raising the tone of philosophy : late essays by Immanuel Kant, transformative critique by Jacques Derrida*, trans. John Leavey Jr., ed. Peter Fenves. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003), 118.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121

process of understanding – of translating what was once impenetrable. The idea of revelation thus lends itself to that of translation, though the direction of causality is unclear. Does revelation enable translation, or does the act of translation terminate in revelation? The Benjaminian concept of the sacred language seems to suggest the latter with some reservation. There is no need to trace the outline of what is hidden if it is completely unveiled, made legible without mediation; revelation eliminates translation. Derrida's metaphor of the royal cloak as translation, to continue the unveiling metaphor, is stripped away to reveal the body of the original text. Yet translation, through this cloaking, suggests the possibility of unveiling- and thus the apocalyptic. The veil can be torn away; the outline of what is veiled suggests an object that has the potential of unmediated presence. The figure of the apocalyptic is created only through this foreboding, this promise and threat, of loss.

The pairing of the origin with the apocalyptic extends the analogy of unveiling. Is the origin then a veiling? The Babel myth subscribes to this understanding of the origin; access to the Adamic tongue that united the builders of Babel is blocked by God's traumatic shattering of language (though the way, then, to the redemptive Pentecost opens). The Babelic origin is a curse that blinds and obscures. The apocalyptic, taken in a redemptionist light, is a lifting of this curse – an enabling of pure communication and revelation that renders translation obsolete.

This brings us to the second important point on revelation, which is that this enabling (of transmission, of translation) is held to be more dangerous than the act of transmission itself:

And what seems the most remarkable in all the biblical examples I was able to find and must forgo exposing here is that the gesture of denuding or of affording sight [*donner a voir*] - *the* apocalyptic movement - is more serious here, sometimes more culpable and more dangerous than what follows and what it can give rise to, for example, copulation.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Perhaps the uncertainty of the apocalyptic (which returns to Derrida's writing on the topic in "The Eyes of Language") stems from the uncertainty of the outcome once the act is set into motion – whether the apocalyptic will terminate in either destruction or salvation. This uncertainty, as Derrida writes, is part of the terror of the apocalyptic. Yet, this denies the reading of the apocalyptic as an ending; the apocalyptic in this respect is an act set into motion – an origin. The apocalyptic must lose its pure negativity (as an ending to the origin) in order to maintain its character as the apocalyptic movement- such pure negativity paradoxically grants it a definitiveness that destroys the terror of the apocalyptic. Even without this definitiveness, the apocalyptic is nonetheless an inescapable "law and a destiny":

We cannot and we must not - this is a law and a destiny - forgo the *Aufklärung*, in other words, what imposes itself as the enigmatic desire for vigilance, for the lucid vigil, the elucidation, for critique and truth, but for a truth that at the same time keeps within itself some apocalyptic desire, this time as desire for clarity and revelation, in order to demystify or, if you prefer, to deconstruct apocalyptic discourse itself and with everything that speculates on vision, the imminence of the end, theophany, parousia, the last judgment.¹²⁸

The *Aufklärung* carries with it the implications of education, elucidation, Enlightenment. As a detour, one might speculate on Derrida's choice to forgo translating the *Aufklärung* in the same motion as Derrida, in "Des Tours De Babel" discusses Benjamin's choice to "[forgo] translating the Mallarmé; he has left it shining in his text like the medallion of a proper name... And in the text of Mallarmé, the effect of being proper and thus untranslatable is tied less to any name or to any truth of adequation than the unique occurrence of a performative force."¹²⁹ The *Aufklärung*, emblematic and denying translation, perhaps occurs as a means of convoking, calling the reader's desire to unveil or define the untranslated, the proper. The desire to translate the proper converges then with the desire for "clarity and revelation," to "demystify."

¹²⁸ Ibid., 148

¹²⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours De Babel" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 113.

In relating to the proper name, the apocalyptic is thus made a hybrid of the restitutive (an ending that completes the beginning, an unveiling that undoes the veiling) and the generative (that which grows in excess, an uncertainty). Such a hybrid, returning to Scholem's figure of the profane revenant of Esperanto, is an outrage because it completes neither function. Yet the apocalyptic can only be thus through this crossing of functions. Should the apocalyptic then be categorized as the profane? This too is problematic; the apocalyptic and the revelation that proclaims it are generated from divine agency. These complications create a confusion of sorts internal to the apocalyptic, even as the apocalyptic in the context of Babel promises an ending of confusion.

Confusion thus ensues through a babble of complications. Derrida works through complications with the multiplicity of the apocalyptic tones through the recognition of two voices – that of the oracle and that of reason. Confusion derives from these two voices working at cross-purposes:

The *Verstimmung* we are speaking about here is indeed a social disorder and a derangement, an out-of-tune-ness [*desaccordement*] of strings and voices in the head. The tone leaps and rises when the voice of the oracle, uncovering your ear, jumbling, covering, or parasitizing the voice of reason equally speaking in each and using the same language with everyone, takes you aside, speaks to you in private code, and whispers secrets to you. The voice of reason, Kant says, *die Stimme der Vernunft*, speaks to each without equivocations (*deutlich*) and gives access to scientific knowledge.¹³⁰

The voice of the oracle is the newly arisen superior tone in philosophy that Kant disdains – those who would fancy themselves philosophers cling to the intuitions that the voice of the oracle grants to them privately. Moreover, the voice of the oracle appears to be in the position of the dangerous supplement, the veil, the broken translation; reliant on the voice of reason for existence, yet exerting a corrupting influence on its truth. The voice of reason, on the other hand,

¹³⁰ Jacques Derrida, "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy" in *Raising the tone of philosophy : late essays by Immanuel Kant, transformative critique by Jacques Derrida*, trans. John Leavey Jr., ed. Peter Fenves. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003), 132.

is democratic – and seems to have a stronger claim on “truth,” that is, the scientific knowledge of reason as opposed to the mystic intuitions of the oracle. At this point, let us recognize a third voice – Kant-as-satirist, which Derrida recognizes as a satire that “aims at mimicry and not the tone itself.”¹³¹ The voice of Kant-as-satirist, however, perhaps only reasserts this division between the philosopher and the oracle through a performative force. Kant-as-satirist is the voice of oracle masquerading as the voice of the philosopher, denouncing itself, parasitizing the figure of the voice of reason.

This lends itself to the problem of distinguishing between the voices (for the voice of the philosopher must be preferred to the voice of the oracle), or even whether the voice of reason truly exists (for it seems only to follow from the parasitizing by the oracular voice). The superior tone in those who do not deserve it is the problem that Kant-as-satirist concerns himself with:

To change voice or mimick the intonation of the other, one must be able to confuse or induce a confusion between two voices, two voices of the other and, necessarily, of the other in oneself.¹³²

Confusion, contrary to the movement of revelation unveiling that which confounds, blurs the boundaries between distinct voices (but perhaps grants the space for the creation of these distinct voices in a Babelic performance).

Such a blurring creates a space through which sin may take place – an “unpardonable” “wrong” against the purity of reason:

... philosophers by profession are not pardoned when they take on a tone, overlordly because, in raising thus the tone, they hoist themselves above their colleagues or comrades (*Zunftgenossen*) [8:394], and wrong them in their unalienable right to freedom and equality regarding everything touching on reason alone. And they do this precisely -

¹³¹ Ibid., 129.

¹³² Ibid.

here's what I was wanting to come to - by perverting the voice of reason, by mixing the two voices of the other in us, the voice of reason and the voice of the oracle.¹³³

Referencing Kant's writing on such confusion (and the search for distinguishing between these competing voices) lends itself to the problem of death that faces philosophy as explicated by Kant-as-satirist, Kant-as-mimic. Derrida seems to take this one step further:

... if one wanted to unmask the ruses, traps, trickeries, seductions, machines of war and pleasure - in short, all the interests of the apocalyptic tone today - it would be necessary to begin by respecting this differential multiplication [*demultiplication*] of voices and tones that perhaps divides them beyond a distinct and calculable plurality.¹³⁴

Only by accepting that the task of distinguishing between and accounting for these voices in an ironic mythical totality can a kind of revelation, an unveiling, a closure in the true restitutive sense, take place. In mentioning irony, I would only return to the ironic definition of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's study of the *romantic* and the fragment-as-genre. An ironic definition paradoxically defies definition. Derrida's ironic "revelation" seems to envelop the original sense of "revelation," in effect unveiling the presence of the veil – outlining "the apocalyptic tone" as indistinct. Only at this moment of confusion, Derrida seems to argue, does the condition of the apocalyptic become clear. In the context of Babel, the shattering of the tower and the return of sacred language brackets the confused tongue of mankind chronologically. Yet Derrida extends this specific condition to *all* discourse and experience, as if all discourse were bracketed by this moment of confusion:

And there is no certainty that man is the exchange [*le central*] of these telephone lines or the terminal of this endless computer. No longer is one very sure who loans its voice and its tone to the other in the Apocalypse; no longer is one very sure who addresses what to whom. But by a catastrophic reversal here more necessary than ever, one can just as well think this: as soon as one no longer knows who speaks or who writes, the text becomes apocalyptic. And if the *envois* always refer [*renvoient*] to other *envois* without decidable destination, the destination remaining to come, then isn't this completely angelic structure, that of the Johannine apocalypse, isn't it also the structure of every scene of

¹³³ Ibid., 130

¹³⁴ Ibid., 156

writing in general? This is one of the suggestions I wanted to submit for your discussion: wouldn't the apocalyptic be a transcendental condition of all discourse, of all experience even, of every mark or every trace? ¹³⁵

What Derrida is suggesting is a confusion of transmission. Such confusion is not just of tone, the ambiguity of *who* is speaking, but is a confusion of the sender and receiver, the ambiguity of who is *speaking*. This collapse of temporality, tone, position is associated with the figures of the telephone and the computer. Man speaks to and speaks through these figures, masking and veiling his presence and those he addresses and is addressed by. The idea of the technological overturning transmission by confusion is a revolution (brought about by the technological revolution). Yet this revolutionary overturning-as-ending by marking *all* discourse as apocalyptic is also generative. It is the apocalypse of the apocalyptic: the movement of the apocalypse in its restitutive position of opposing-origination to an endless proliferation of the apocalyptic in "all experience even, of every mark and every trace."

Derrida is aware that his suggestion, remarkably paralleling his reading of Kant's proclamation, is itself a proclamation of an ending:

But if Kant denounces those who proclaim that philosophy has been at an end for two thousand years, he has himself, in marking a limit, indeed at the end of a certain type of metaphysics, freed another wave of eschatological discourses in philosophy. His progressivism, his belief in the future of a certain philosophy, indeed of another metaphysics, is not contradictory to this proclamation of ends and of the end. ¹³⁶

While Kant's proclamation denies an ending of philosophy, Derrida writes that such a pronouncement cannot deny apocalyptic discourse. Derrida's suggestion is that there is no end, no limitation to how the apocalyptic becomes the condition of discourse and experience. His suggestion seems to seal a containment of this confusion, yet his question (inviting a closing answer) piles confusion on confusion. The question invites the imminence and finality of an

¹³⁵ Ibid., 156-157.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 144-145.

answer onto the figure of the apocalyptic – perhaps proclaiming, even, in its radical uncertainty, its fidelity to the uncertainty of figure of the apocalypse. To answer such a question, then, is to seal the apocalypse – to nominally complete, but also to contain.

The issue of closure is tied to that of death, dismemberment and cataclysm, though in the sense that Kant speaks of the death of philosophy, perhaps a more suitable phrase would be "to kill." The violence that is done that ends in the termination of life is something that Kant-as-satirist attempts to defend against in his essay:

More seriously, he attacks a tone that announces something like *the death of philosophy*. The expression is Kant's and appears twice in this twenty-page lampoon; each time, this death is associated with the idea of a supernatural revelation, of a vision provoking a mystic exaltation or at least a visionary's pose. The first time, it is a question of a "supernatural communication" or a "mystical illumination" ("*ubernaturliche Mitteilung, mystische Erleuchtung*") that promises a substitute or a supplement, a surrogate of a knowable object, "which is then the death of all philosophy (*der Tod aller Philosophie*)" [8:398]. And right near the end, Kant warns against the danger of an "exalting vision (*schwärmerische Vision*), which is the death of all philosophy" (once more "*der Tod aller Philosophie*") [8:405]¹³⁷

The "exalting vision" kills philosophy because it replaces philosophy; mystic thinking replaces intellectual rigor. The voice of Kant-as-satirist, however, attacks this "mystic thinking" from the "exalting vision" of philosophy-as-reason, problematizing this divide. Those who would do violence against that which is accorded the status of life (philosophy) must be brought to a kind of retribution (though, as mentioned before, this "life of philosophy" is only retroactively created by the "mystic thinking" that threatens "the death of all philosophy"):

He brings to judgment those who, by the tone they take and the air they give themselves when saying certain things, place philosophy in danger of death and tell philosophy or philosophers the imminence of their end. The imminence matters no less than the end. The end is near, they seem to say, which does not exclude that it may have already taken place, a little as in John's Apocalypse the imminence of the end or of the last judgment does not exclude a certain " "you are dead. / Stay awake!" " [3:1-2], whose diction follows close on the allusion to a " 'second death' " that will never overtake the victor.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ibid., 124.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 125.

This judgment comprises of both the “ending” and the “imminence” – the restitutive act of perfect judgment that is consonant with the crime paradoxically generates an excess in its imminence that is associated with revelation. This assurance of ending, as discussed before, is associated with the revelation that proclaims the apocalypse-as-ending that is associated with death:

Verstimmung, if that is henceforth what we call the derailment, the sudden change [*sauté*] of tone, as one would say *la sauté d’humeur* ‘the sudden change of mood,’ is the disorder or the delirium of destination (*Berstimmung*), but also the possibility of all emission. The unity of tone, if there were any, would certainly be the assurance of destination, but also death, another apocalypse.¹³⁹

Apocalypse-as-death intersects with the problematic life-death dichotomy of language. Such an apocalypse (the advent of the sacred Pentecostal tongue) would “kill” the broken tongue of Babel, inverting the rhetoric of threat and danger to that of cure and cleansing.

In the context of Kant’s argument on the endangering of philosophy, these “false” philosophers would cause death and dismemberment, crippling truth for their own edification:

The castration or not of *logos* as *ratio* is a central form of this debate around metaphysics. It is also a fight around the poetic (between poetry and philosophy), around the death or the future of philosophy. The stake is the same. Kant does not doubt this: the new preachers need to pervert philosophy into poetry to give themselves grand airs, to occupy through simulacrum and mimicry the place of the great, to usurp thus an essentially symbolic power.¹⁴⁰

The rhetoric of dismemberment (and thus the fragment), of perversion, by necessity points to the origin. Dismemberment is damage to the living body; it prevents transmission via castration, blindness, deafness, dumbness. Kant implies (and thus problematizes) through his voice as Kant-the-satirist, as the voice of the oracle *as* the voice of reason, that philosophy as distinct from poetry is originally without perversion. Such deviation can only cause a shattering, a

¹³⁹ Ibid., 150.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 140.

castration – a becoming of less than whole as “new preachers” “pervert philosophy into poetry.” Such a corruption of philosophy can only point towards a cure as a return to original health or to death; one cannot tell if the apocalyptic will save or kill it, though either outcome is certain. Such configuration of corruption beckoning either death or redemption recalls Scholem’s fear of the apocalyptic vengeance of language. Scholem’s fears can only be realized, though, if language, despite “castration,” is not rendered impotent. An important distinction might be between Kant and Scholem’s arguments in that unlike Scholem, Kant-as-satirist does not claim an agency for philosophy; it cannot wreak divine vengeance on those who would profane it. Does philosophy in its outrage, like the sacred language of Scholem, then visit a vengeance upon the heads of the innocent and the culpable alike? Yet profaning philosophy, killing philosophy as an intellectual discipline destroys the space wherein both “true” and “false” philosophers alike exist (though to destroy this space would also destroy the possibility for outrage and perversion). The purity of reason that typifies philosophy implies then a kind of sacred vitality that can be outraged, dismembered, destroyed. Dismemberment, in inviting imminence, is a precursor and party to the apocalyptic.

In the context of Babel, such an apocalyptic trauma arrives when the living Adamic tongue is castrated and dismembered; the builders of profane Babel are scattered to the winds. The end of the Pentecost is not so much an apocalyptic dismemberment as it is a remembrance of the lost speech of Paradise. Yet, as Derrida explicates in his critique of Scholem’s letter, the halting of transmission through bodily dismemberment can only hasten the apocalypse. Only the blind, the foolish would walk the abyss of secularizing Hebrew, but once revelation, truth and sight come upon them, such a suspension over the unseen abyss is no longer possible. In seeing, they can only fall into the darkness.

Artificial Language Projects

Having established the key characteristics of the Babelic figure, one might then begin by thinking about how these characteristics (and Derrida's critique of them) form the basis for the motivations and growth of artificial language projects.

Andrew Large, in his book *The Artificial Language Movement*, traces the origins of artificial languages back to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. The scientific revolution was justly named because the "older habit of speculation in natural philosophy, based upon Aristotelian principles, were being replaced by systematic research and experimentation."¹⁴¹ Quoting *the new Cambridge modern history*, Large writes that "the distinctive new move made in scientific research was to look for the intelligibility of nature not in immediate observation but in an underlying mathematical and mechanical structure, and to seek by systematic and quantitative theoretical analysis and experimentation to discover the one actual structure of this real world."¹⁴² The search for an overarching structure is in essence a search for an origin, a universal grammar, a great Truth.

Mary Slaughter also locates the origins of the artificial language movement in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, but proposes a much more specific connection between science and language beyond a shift from empirical inductive observation to theoretical deduction – her thesis is that "natural history was the context in which the artificial languages developed."¹⁴³ The taxonomy of the natural world and the taxonomy of language are inextricably linked: "If we trace the development of plant taxonomy as one of the primary examples of

¹⁴¹ Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 4.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Mary M. Slaughter, *Universal languages and scientific taxonomy in the seventeenth century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 48.

natural history, we see that this natural history was the context in which the artificial languages developed. It is no coincidence that many of the figures connected with the artificial languages were also connected with natural science. Natural history provided the methods of constructing taxonomies and the assumptions upon which those methods were built. The search for order was being conducted in all areas of nature and the methods of searching were freely exchanged between one part and another.”¹⁴⁴

Slaughter’s hypothesis is of particular interest because it touches on both the movement towards taxonomy – to organize by breaking down into constituent parts, and points to historical precedents behind the metaphor of biological vitality in language.

Both attribute Francis Bacon as the originating figure of artificial languages; Bacon’s contribution and project was “the possibility of representing things instead of sounds by ‘real characters’ rather than letters, characters which could be understood regardless of language.”¹⁴⁵ The belief that the pictographs of Chinese pointed to the possibility of a language that was immediately legible without need for translation. This seems to recall the Biblical Pentecost, where the voice of God is heard in the native tongue of those that hear it.

The process of taxonomy as the thrust of science attempting to assimilate the unknown into a system of knowledge might be thought in the context of Babel as the totalizing force that carries with it the promise of redemption from fragmentation. Yet as the examination of Babel shows, the belief in this totalizing, translating force is subject to critique – best expounded in the example of Ogden’s Basic International English.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 4-5.

Ultimately, the scientific revolution pushed toward the systematization which enabled artificial languages by an attempt to organize the natural world into basic principles – a movement not unlike the search for a universal grammar which constitutes one of the poles of modern linguistic study.

Volapük and Esperanto were born from this process of taxonomy. The systematization of language created a conduit through which artificial languages could be created. Scholem, in his letter, denounce both as examples of an “empty” language, and a warning of what Hebrew will become should the project to secularize the language continue. This “emptiness” of artificial languages, to which we will return later in examining Basic International English, contrasts with the concept of “living” languages- languages that “organically” developed.

Volapük was a creation of Monsignor Johann Martin Scheleyer, a German parish priest. Volapük, as Large notes, was “largely based upon English as the most widespread language of civilized peoples.”¹⁴⁶ Volapük itself meant “world-speak,” belying the ambition of its creator. Large writes of Scheleyer that he “believed that all natural languages had grave defects which the absolutely rational and regular use grammar of a constructed language could avoid,”¹⁴⁷ and that Volapük was to be his “contribution to the unity and fraternity of mankind, a grandiose work of peace.”¹⁴⁸ Volapük, first published in 1880, was the first artificial language to achieve some measure of success. It spread rapidly, and by 1889, “there were some 293 societies or clubs scattered throughout the world.”¹⁴⁹ However, Volapük declined in use after infighting over the growth and use of the language ensued, particularly over Scheleyer’s decision not to simplify

¹⁴⁶ L. Couturat and L. Lea, *Histoire de la langue universelle*. Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1903, pp. 128 – 62. as quoted in Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

¹⁴⁷ Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 64-65.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

Volapük despite calls from those who wanted a language for everyday international communication.¹⁵⁰

The rise of Esperanto followed in the wake of Volapük. Esperanto was created by Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof; in its own language, it means “one who hopes.” This hope is the unity of humanity through a uniting language, presumably Esperanto. Zamenhof writes that of his hometown: “In Bialystok the population consisted of four diverse elements: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews; each spoke a different language and was hostile to the other elements. In this town, more than anywhere else, an impressionable nature feels the heavy burden of linguistic differences and is convinced, at every step, that the diversity of language is the only, or at least, the main cause, that separates the human family and divides it into conflicting groups.”¹⁵¹ The belief that difference in language is a barrier to the pure communication essential to peace drives to create an artificial language. Zamenhof explicitly names this motivation:

“I need not dilate upon the immense importance for Humanity of the existence of an International Language, one that could be adopted by all nations and be the common property of the whole world, without belonging in any way to any existing nationality.”¹⁵²

Zamenhof believed that the success of Esperanto would be tied to his language acquiring a kind of vitality and life that he associated with common, secular use:

“Means must be found to overcome the indifference of the bulk of mankind, and to cause the masses to make use of the language offered as a living tongue and not solely to be used with the aid of a dictionary.”¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Marjorie Boulton, *Zamenhof, creator of Esperanto*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, pp. 6 -7. as quoted in Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

¹⁵² Dr Esperanto, *An attempt towards an international language*. New York: Holt, 1889, as quoted in Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

¹⁵³ Dr Esperanto, *An attempt towards an international language*. New York: Holt, 1889.

Fundamento de Esperanto – “that is to say, Esperanto was now stabilized in its essential forms; it could and would change slowly through usage, as any other living language, but such modifications would be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.”¹⁵⁴

The contrast between a “revolutionary” artificial language, one that challenges natural order, and an “evolutionary” “living” language touches both on the idea of restitution and life present in the Babelic figure.

Furthermore, bound up in this desire of linguistic vitality is also a messianic sentiment that recalls the issue of sacredness in language:

Zamenhof conceived the idea of a world religion which should help to reconcile rather than replace other religions, promoting tolerance and respect, characteristics so palpably lacking in the Poland of his own childhood.¹⁵⁵

Religion, while ostensibly antagonistic to the technological roots of artificial language, nonetheless figures deeply in both Esperanto and Volapük. This is a different tack from Ogden and Richard’s disavowal of the mystic vein in their Basic International English, though Basic International English may still be subject to an analysis through the theological lens.¹⁵⁶

Zamenhof’s idea of a religion that would assist existing world religions returns to the problem of the fragment and the supplement, and extends to the perceived role of Esperanto in the same position in the field of languages.

¹⁵⁴ Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 77.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵⁶

Basic International English

All such terms as Intuition, Intellect, Emotion, Freedom, Logic, Immediacy, are already famous for their power to confuse and frustrate discussion.

– C.K Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*

Ogden's *The System of Basic English* provides an excellent case study on artificial languages. Ogden and Richard's project accords with the motivations and goals of the larger artificial language movement, and their modification of an existing language to fit the needs of the movement proves a fascinating comparison with Scholem's "actualized" Hebrew. Ogden and Richard's Basic International English project also stemmed largely from their critical beliefs, and thus a reading of their collaborative work *The Meaning of Meanings* may shed light on the configuration of Babel that Ogden and Richards operated within.

Ogden, in *The System of Basic English*, writes that:

Basic English has two chief purposes:

1. To serve as an international auxiliary language; that is to say, a second language for use throughout the world in general communication, commerce, and science.
2. To provide a rational introduction to normal English; both as a first step, complete in itself, for those whose natural language is not English, and as a grammatical introduction, encouraging clarity of thought and expression, for English-speaking peoples at any stage of proficiency.¹⁵⁷

Thus, Basic International English performs both an external and internal function. First, the external function: Basic International English is to serve as a language of international communication. Second, the internal function: as a means of "encouraging clarity of thought and expression," as self-improvement.

¹⁵⁷ C. K. Ogden, *The System of Basic English*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934), 4.

I will first address the external function. The search for a language of international communication returns to the rhetoric of Babel – when Ogden attempts to justify Basic International English as *the* language for international communication, he resorts raising Babel as the reason:

I. BABEL

Considerable ignorance seems to exist as to the extent to which Babel actually prevails. What the World needs most is about 1,000 more dead languages – and one more alive. The so-called national barriers of today are, for the most part, ultimately language barriers. The absence of a common medium of communication is the chief obstacle to international understanding, and consequently the chief underlying cause of War. It is also the most formidable obstacle to the progress of international Science, and to the development of international Commerce.¹⁵⁸

Ogden's language implies that those without ignorance are able to "correctly" apprehend the extent that Babel is prevalent. In doing so, Ogden introduces the paradigm of seeing/blindness that we shall pick up later in relation to the fragment and supplement. Moreover, he evokes the metaphor of vitality in the context of language. Basic English must become *the* single living language, while the rest should slide into death and obsolescence in order to pave the way for a common medium of communication. A *single* fragment imbued with life is to become the new whole. Ogden's plan is paired with the constructive mobilization of death. While Basic English must become a living language, the other languages must "die" – in this context, apparently, to fall out of secular or international use. The World in order to survive or progress, *requires* the death of these languages. Ogden, in the vein of his vitalist metaphor, seems to be suggesting a kind of linguistic apoptosis. His proposal of a 'turning back' of how much Babel prevails furthermore suggests a nostalgia for the pre-Babelic.

This nostalgia for the pre-Babelic is particularly fascinating when examining the critical roots of Basic International English, which disclaim "superstitious Word-Magic," that is, the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

belief that signifiers correspond to some degree with the signified, which is very much tied to the notion of the pre-Babelic Adamic tongue as explicated by biblical scholarship. Ogden and Richards instead argue that word use is arbitrary and shaped by context rather than any special connection between meaning and word: “words ‘mean’ nothing by themselves...they are instruments.”¹⁵⁹ If words do not carry a mystic charge or a real threat of divine retribution, then what motivates this life? A reading of Ogden and Richards on the question of life in language seems to both embrace and reject the Benjaminian conception of life. Life can imbue the inanimate; the chief driver of life is history, not soul or sensation. Yet how can an artificial language acquire this history? Moreover, as Benjamin argues, language grows only through translation; Ogden and Richards would render translation obsolete by denying the possibility of translation. Where might Basic English acquire this life? Ogden is silent on this question, but the answer is hinted at when we discuss sacredness.

As Ogden would have it, this imbuing of a single language with life (and the death of the other languages) will remove the “chief underlying cause of War” – that is, miscommunication. Speaking a single language will enable human life to flourish. Perhaps to intervene at this point in passing, the assumption that miscommunication can only happen between languages is to ignore, as Steiner points out, how translation occurs within language. Tension and slippages arise not only between cultures but within social classes and dialects within a single language. Moreover, to attribute War to miscommunication is to imply that there was no such widespread conflict prior to Babel, again evoking nostalgia for a pre-Babelic Golden Age where peace throughout the world was prevalent. One might also intervene at this point to note that only

¹⁵⁹ C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923), 10.

through Babelization prevailing can the pre-Babelic be imagined and can Ogden's Debabelization take place.

Ogden's mention of Babel is fascinating because of Babel's function as the proper name. Ogden does not explicate the meaning of Babel, instead relying on the implied connotations of Babel-as-catastrophe, Babel-as-condition, Babel-as-seal to carry his rhetorical argument. The density, the excess of meaning that attends Babel as the name renders it resistant to translation, to clarity. Babel is the event that renders miscommunication possible, but it is also the prevalence of this miscommunication and the preventing of Man from "international understanding." One might examine how this reliance on the name that defies and commands translation in order to build a case for the death of translation constitutes a certain blind spot in Ogden's argument. To touch on Derrida's writing on the supplement and blindness, "the blind person cannot see, in its origin, the very thing he produces to supplement his sight."¹⁶⁰ One might posit Babel, with its double bind of the proper, as the location of such blindness.

Ogden's belief in the improving functions of Basic English points to a belief in language as a means of clarifying thought and expression. This has some connection to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which holds that there is a relationship between how someone speaks a language and how they understand the world around them: how a language is configured, how certain distinctions are emphasized and how words relate to one another shape how one responds and thinks. Ogden is much more specific in what he takes as desirable: by pruning language of "loose verbiage,"¹⁶¹ thinking is made clearer, more systematic and less prone to lapses:

¹⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 149.

¹⁶¹ C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923), 4.

Basic itself is a valuable exercise in the understanding of word-behavior. It forms an admirable introduction to that further study of the relations of thought and language which will prove a potent antidote to all forms of Word-magic in the future. Its analytic structure makes it desirable for the learner to understand rather than to learn by rote; and at an early stage it can indicate the scope and internationality of the sciences as such.¹⁶²

Ogden reverses Scholem's lament on the vulgarization and outrage of language. Language gains life through the very act of making language available for common use, though Ogden also appeals to the rhetoric of vitality and corruption. Understanding the "relations of thought and language" is the "antidote" to the implied poison of "Word-magic." Ogden's "cleaner," "curative" language will be more suitable for scientific or logical discourse; pitfalls that a "loose" language sets in philosophical discourse can be eliminated:

The real task before that science [of language] cannot be successfully attempted without a far more critical consciousness of the dangers of such loose verbiage. It is impossible thus to handle a scientific matter in metaphorical terms, and the training of philologists has not, as a rule, been such as to increase their command of analytic and abstract language. The logician would be far better equipped in this respect were it not that his command of language tends to conceal from him what he is talking about and renders him prone to accept purely linguistic constructions, which serve well enough for his special purposes, as ultimates.¹⁶³

The "loose verbiage" that Ogden indicts associates itself with the excess of meaning. Such looseness, in passing, may be linked to Benjamin's metaphor of translation as the royal cape that clings loosely to the regal body. We will return to a deeper explication of this metaphor later. Ogden engages in the rhetorical exercise of associating excess with the profane, the contaminant – that which causes sickness and ignorance. The deficient but excessive verbiage of language prevents and seals a logical discourse – and with it education, elucidation, enlightenment.

¹⁶² C. K. Ogden, *The System of Basic English*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934), 33

¹⁶³ C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923), 4-5

As Ogden argues, the current languages used for scientific discourse are flawed; a purely scientific discourse is not possible without a language shaped by a similar economy. Ogden and Richards posit the Theory of Signs, which distinguishes between the emotive and symbolic poles of language. To briefly outline the emotive and the symbolic:

The symbolic use of words is statement; the recording, the support, the organization of references. The emotive use of words is a more simple matter, it is the use of words to express or excite feelings or attitudes.¹⁶⁴

Ogden and Richards, as an example of the symbolic, cite mathematics; poetry, on the other hand, is purely emotive. Only through understanding the nature of a statement (either emotive or symbolic) can obstructions to interpretation be surmounted:

This simple application of the Theory of Signs frees us from the paradox, the oddness, and the wonder, restores our faith in the physicist, and enables us to get on with our business, viz., a proper account of perception of the Nature of Things.¹⁶⁵

Through Science, barriers to interpretation (paradox, oddness, wonder) are eliminated. These points of resistance may be connected to how the proper name resists translation through a confusing excess and deficit of meaning. One must then discuss the notion of confusion. Confusion obscures and causes miscommunication; only through distinguishing between the symbolic and emotive voices can clarity be achieved.

At this point, the Derridian explication of confusion intervenes. The confusion that arises from Emotive functions masquerading as the Symbolic recalls Derrida's discussion on Kant-as-satirist. Kant's ironic imperative that the voice of the philosopher be distinguished from the voice of oracle, lest the intellectual discipline of philosophy fall into outrage and death, mirrors and satirizes Ogden's imperative that symbolic and emotive functions be distinguished lest miscommunication loose war. Emotive functions, like the voice of the oracle, threaten rigorous

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 182.

symbolic functions (associated with the voice of the philosopher) and thus truth with death. Yet this proclamation, as Derrida and Kant-as-satirist suggest, can only take place within the space provided by an “exalted vision”; the philosophical voice is formed retroactively through its threat of death at the hands of the oracular voice.

Derrida further develops this notion of confusion. The blurring of the oracular and philosophical, and to extend this thinking to Ogden - the emotive and symbolic, in confusion threatens philosophy-as-reason. Yet as Derrida writes, the babble of voices perhaps proliferates beyond a “distinct and calculable plurality.” Such resistance will not yield to the translative force of taxonomy and to insist otherwise is to perhaps fall into another kind of confusion as avoidance of Derrida’s ironic revelation.

As Ogden would have it though, through this distinction between voices, purer communication is enabled, and the connection between Man and Science is repaired: “our faith in the physicist is restored.” Moreover, Man is freed from the blindness and impotence of communication that interferes with the “proper account of perception of the Nature of Things.” A scientific language, formulated through scientific principles, complements Science. Ogden and Richards take this even further:

Through this Theory of Signs then we can not only remove the standard pre-scientific paradoxes, but provide a new basis for Physics. ¹⁶⁶

Two seemingly contradictory goals are accomplished. First, Ogden’s new language becomes science in becoming a theoretical approach to “properly perceiving the Nature of Things.” Second, this language exceeds science in becoming the means through which science can move past its limits of “the standard pre-scientific paradoxes.”

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 184.

The first goal points to a will to science latent in Ogden and Richard's work: language, through the division into the symbolic and emotive functions, can be transformed into a science. This is accomplished through the isolation and removal of emotive elements to forge a "logical discourse" worthy of science:

It is unfortunately very necessary to insist upon the importance of the distinction between the two functions of speech. Confusion between them leads to wrangles in which intellect and Emotion, Reason and Feeling, Logic and Intuition, are set in artificial opposition to one another; though easily perceived, these two functions do not in any way trespass upon one another's provinces.¹⁶⁷

The assumption latent in this translation is that Symbolic functions of language lend themselves to unproblematic communication; Emotive functions do not. Confusion between the Symbolic and the Emotive causes miscommunication. We have already discussed the notion of confusion and how this problematizes this act of distinguishing between these voices. Through association, technology and science not only become a product of unproblematic communication, but by necessity enable it. One might contrast technology as imagined by Ogden (redemptive, progressive) with the technological contamination decried by Scholem. More interestingly, perhaps, Derrida's explication of the confusion created by the technological revolution as perpetuated by the figures of the computer and the telephone opens the question of the apocalyptic in relation to science. Certainly, the revolutionary promise of Basic English for science beckons a kind of overturning, but that will be returned to later.

This "logical discourse" discards what cannot be readily translated, appealing less to the restitutive act than to the metaphor of alchemical purification. To actualize this "logical discourse," Ogden proposes a reduction, a denial, a sealing of excess. Derrida's critique of the metaphor of translation as a mantle that sits on the kingly figure might be applicable here in two

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 379.

manners that work at cross-purpose. First, as touched on previously, the looseness that characterizes translation, as Ogden and Richards would have it, endangers this pure communication. However, as a second point, Ogden and Richard must nonetheless seek recourse to “translating” Science into this “logical discourse.” Ogden’s proposed symbolic language, in the mode of the royal cape, is distinct from and exalts the science (Physics) which it claims to speak for, and science, as the regal body, “is only promised, announced and dissimulated by the translation.”¹⁶⁸ We cannot pierce the veil of language to uncover the True Science behind the representing discourse. Yet in becoming the mantle for the metaphorical king, the language must itself become science; this argues either for a much tighter integration between the science/language dialectic or there is a recursive enfolding that complicates the metaphor: Ogden’s language must negatively mantle itself in the trappings of science (by discarding its emotive elements, leaving wholly symbolic functions, though to do so may be a fantasy) in order to become a worthy medium for the translation of Science. The idea of artificiality (the cloak as artificial, a “text of artifice”¹⁶⁹ as Derrida would put it) supports the systemic taxonomy and intervention that Ogden proposes on the English language to render it “worthy” of purely symbolic communication. Such artificiality is connotative of the restitutive act that is associated with “good” translation. However, Ogden, despite his implication in translation and the artificial, insists on the rhetoric of the organic; English must become the “living language.” The insistence of the organic may privilege the other Benjaminian metaphor between language and content, that of the fruit where the core and skin are tightly bound. Yet again, difficulties intervene. While the privileging of “tightness” above “looseness” is apparent in his efforts, the deliberately constructed nature of Basic International English renders the metaphor of organicity problematic.

¹⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours De Babel” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 125.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Moreover, while the prior discussion may suggest that the symbolic is the “original” to the emotive’s “supplement,” (for the emotive threatens, parasitizes, adds to the self-sufficient symbolic) Ogden’s proposed symbolic language complies with the configuration of the dangerous supplement in its attempt to destroy translation-as-supplement. This symbolic language at once exalts Science in holding itself to a science-like systemic rigor, while denigrating and replacing Science by becoming the medium through which Science can be conducted and grow, implying that Science itself is imperfect. To return to the metaphor of the royal cape, perhaps to uncover the veil would be to reveal the regal body in its nakedness, bereft of the authority endowed by the mantle. In thinking about Basic International English in the context of the supplement, the notion of blindness discussed by Derrida again intervenes. Blindness births the supplement. From Ogden and Richard’s perspective, both the impotence being unable to transmit without damage (miscommunication) and ignorance is equivalent to blindness – focused through the name of Babel. Yet this blindness also enables the restoration of sight through the revolutionary language of Basic English. Ogden and Richard, on the side of “reason” and “science,” are “incapable of thinking this double infringement”¹⁷⁰ of Basic English-as-supplement, where there is a *lack* in Science, and because of that lack, Basic English must intervene.

The second goal of Basic International English, to lay down a new basis for Science, contains the motif of revelation and revolution that echoes the concerns of the theological apocalyptic. Ogden’s belief that such a language can pierce the veil of scientific limitations brings to bear the rhetoric of revelation that is associated with the apocalyptic. Basic International English will be the catastrophe to the catastrophe – a radical ending of Babelization

¹⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 149.

by not only reinstating faith in Science but by generating a new basis for progress. This configuration of a simultaneous restitution and generation returns to the apocalyptic component of Babel (a revolution in both senses of the word) while paradoxically recalling Scholem's figure of the revenant which threatens both life and sacredness. The revenant is a botched resurrection, a failure and success of both restitution and generation. The association of the revenant with the proper and the apocalyptic invokes and calls a Derridian response. Here, one perhaps might *see* more clearly the threat that Basic English poses to Science (while also enabling the notion of Science to exist) even as it *adds* and enables "logical discourse." Basic English, from a reading of Ogden's text, is the revolution and the promise of progress – but also the threat and the undermining of existing scientific foundations.

Across both of these problematized functions, Ogden privileges English above other languages:

Why English:

1. Because English is now the natural or governmental language of over 500,000,000 people. It is already the second language of the Far East; it is compulsory in countries with such diverse interests as Japan, Germany, Argentina, and Esthonia; it is the language of more than 800 of the world's 1,400 Radio stations; *its structure is simpler than that of any of the other great natural languages.*
2. No other existing language can be simplified to anything like the same extent. The chief difficulties of normal English are eliminated in Basic. One result of this analysis and simplification of normal English is that Basic is very similar in character to Chinese- which gives it a special claim as a medium of communication with and in the East.¹⁷¹

These privileges that designate English as the prime candidate for "living language" might be categorized as either associated with the degree of usage or with the degree of possible simplification. With regard to the degree of usage, Ogden appeals to how widespread English is,

¹⁷¹ C. K. Ogden, *The System of Basic English*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934), 5.

both within countries and through technological channels of communication such as the Radio. A problematic component to appealing to degree of usage is that the widespread proliferation of the English language at Ogden's time of writing was the outcome of a period of aggressive colonial expansion on the part of the British Empire. While Ogden's argument on this front may be practical: English is widely used, therefore changing over to Basic International English will be easy. However, this argument also undercuts the universal appeal he mounts in his second privileging of English. One of his chief reasons for adopting English as the global common language is backed by historical circumstance and the balance of power in the West; such a reason, based on the reach of the Empire, does not privilege English's intrinsic worth over any other kind of language. One might say that not unlike Ogden's concept of words as arbitrary signifiers, that the choice of English then is purely arbitrary and driven by context.

On the other hand, Ogden gives a second reason that does laud the intrinsic worth of English: it can be simplified more than other existing languages. The motivations behind simplification have already been discussed in relation to the will to science; the linguistic simplification advocated by Ogden is associated with technology and purification. Emotive functions can be distinguished from the symbolic and contained. Ogden also uses the association of his language with technology to deny the viability of other languages, including other artificial languages:

...in no sense is it likely that the foundation of such a language has been laid either in Esperanto or in any other proposal for a constructed symbol system- though such experiments are of great psychological interest.¹⁷²

Ogden's claim that Basic International English alone possesses a sound foundation and has the only claim on technical, theoretical roots, thus supporting its right to "life" among the thousands

¹⁷² Ibid., 34.

of dead languages thus links technology (as encompassed by science, the scientific method, theory) to vitality. What is needed, it seems, is a language backed by science, or language as a science:

It is not always new words that are needed, but a means of controlling them as symbols, a means of readily discovering to what in the world on any occasion they are used to refer, and this is what an adequate theory of definition should provide.¹⁷³

Not only are “artificial languages” such as Esperanto insufficient (and fail to fill the real void: a means of word-manipulation as purely communicative devices), but other “natural” languages that cannot be pruned of their “loose verbiage” and readily controlled for communicative ends must be purged. “Loose verbiage” and the emotive functions are associated with an idea of excess meaning, of generation – but also of insufficiency and lack, of being unable to measure up to the rigors of scientific communication. The rejection of this paradoxical lack and excess compares to Scholem’s fears of sacred words “filled to bursting with meaning” being both emptied and overfilled with a secular overwriting of the sacred. The damaging effects of excess meaning – miscommunication and thus war – must be recognized and then “occulted and denied” through a paring down of language. Derrida’s critique of Scholem’s fear of secularization, it seems, can ironically be applied to this very act of “secularization.” In thinking about Ogden’s contrast to Scholem, one may raise the same critique that Derrida does on Scholem and the Zionists. Ogden, like Scholem and the Zionists, appears to be engaging in fetishizing language. This fetishizing is not coached in the rhetoric of the sacred, but appeals rather to “logic,” “science,” “theory” and “reason.” Again, one is reminded of Kant’s lampoon of the voice of the oracle – while the concern is for reason, the tenor of the argument registers in a more oracular scale.

¹⁷³ C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923), 26.

Basic International English, in Ogden's argument, can and must resolve the curse of Babel which interferes with human welfare. Ogden coins a term to describe this resolution of the Babelian barriers to peace, progress and prosperity- Debabelization:

IV. DEBABELIZATION

In estimating the value of Basic as a solution it is always desirable to bear in mind the needs of the smaller countries of the world. Their disadvantages have never been more clearly summarized than by Mr. H. G. Wells....

- i) Ill-served by limits on his own language in the fields of literature, science, news and information. – “In most places he is for all practical purposes deaf and dumb.”¹⁷⁴
- ii) “He must either become a mental subject of one of the greater languages or sink to the intellectual status of a peasant.”¹⁷⁵

The humanitarian justification for a common language, from Ogden's perspective, appeals two metaphors. The first metaphor is that of disability, with wholeness as the ability to be party to transmission (receiving or sending). The second is that of social status in the intellectual realm, where those colonized are either subjects or peasants.

The first metaphor speaks to Ogden and H. G. Well's belief in at least a double existence for the human being. The first is that of physical being: flesh, sight, hearing, the mouth. The second is that of the human as a being able to participate in communication. Without having access to the imperial power language's implied “limitlessness” in literature, science, news and information (which recalls the limitless power accorded through a united language in the Bible), the native (is there a better word for the colonial subject?) of a smaller country is rendered deaf and dumb, incomplete and fragmented by the relative disparity in ability to engage in transmission despite his physical state remaining unchanged. The native as a being determined by transmission is disabled within the linguistic orbit of the imperial power.

¹⁷⁴ C. K. Ogden, *The System of Basic English*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934), 33.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

The second metaphor continues the language of subjugation: the native must either choose between becoming a mental subject or be denigrated as a peasant. The metaphor that joins flesh and transmission is extended to social class. Ogden promises an end to both disadvantages through Basic International English, though how Basic International English will do so is not completely clear. With the relationship between language and thought already so heavily emphasized by Ogden, such a physical subject cannot help but become a mental subject, if not to “one of the greater languages,” then to Basic International English. Moreover, Basic International English can only offer the solution to the first disadvantage if all existing literary, scientific and journalistic discourse were carried out in Basic International English, which was not the case at the time of Ogden’s publishing of his language project.

More pertinent to this examination, however, is Ogden’s evoking of the metaphors of fragmentation and loss (through disability, deafness and dumbness) as well as social hierarchy (through subjects and peasants), which touch upon the configuration of Babel. The native, trapped within Babel’s curse, is stranded on an insular linguistic fragment that isolates him from Ogden’s Debabelized Basic International English-speaking world. This stranding of the native within a language-fragment of Babel then fragments the native, cutting away the faculties of speech and hearing. Yet this fragmentation can only take place in retrospect; only after the promise of a Debabelized world (free from the impotence of miscommunication) is offered can deafness and dumbness afflict the native. The traditional notion of the fragment as the outcome of a traumatic shattering, of an incompleteness that yearns to be repaired, mobilizes morality on the side of Basic International English—not only can it miraculously heal schisms between cultures, but it can make the deaf hear and the dumb talk. The metaphor of social hierarchy, in contrast to that of fragmentation, implies a structure that is still extant. However, this structure is

mobilized for oppression, reducing the colonial subject to peasantry or subjugation to imperial languages. Basic International English, Ogden seems to imply, promises an escape from this oppression: a lifting of this structure to enable those pressed under it to rise up through a kind of freedom. This messianic vein that attends Ogden's metaphors (healing the sick, freeing the slaves) produces a particularly interesting contrast with Scholem's criticism of the secularization of Hebrew as an incitement of the apocalyptic which I will cover shortly. More interestingly, these metaphors both carry with them a promise of restitution (a return to health or pre-state freedom), which finds resonance with the metaphor of Babel as an originary trauma that beckons the restitutive Pentecost.

The critique of the fragment, then, intervenes in this reading of Ogden. The fragment, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write, calls confusion upon itself. But this confusion is not an echo or reminder of Babel as an origin of a primal confusion, but instead generates a productive excess that adds to the original work – making it more “complete.” The productive confusion of the fragment is ignored in favor of a “lesser” totality; Ogden's desire is that the productive excess of other languages be eliminated in favor of a universal transparency. The reading of the fragment seems to suggest that such a transfer of life to Basic International English is not possible, and renders the belief that such a language can only flourish through the death of other languages problematic. The extinction of other languages would halt the growth and development of the single surviving language.

Yet through Debabelization, Ogden seems to suggest, the curse of miscommunication is lifted and the world returns to peace and progress. Ogden seems to associate the nature of restitution (someone is compensated a balance or restored to an original state) with his vision of Debabelization; yet this restitution is only accomplished through the introduction of an excess- a

language external to the colonized culture. This positions Basic International English as a kind of supplement: it complements the existing language, derided by Ogden as “dead,” by filling its insufficiencies – yet it also seeks to replace the “dead language” with its own claimed “vitality.” This is a reversal of the “traditional” conceiving of the metaphor in Derrida’s critique of Rousseau: Nature in itself is sufficient, while Man and his technology are positioned as “that dangerous supplement.” This torquing of the configuration perhaps reflects an attempt to gain the rhetorical best of both worlds. Through this, Basic International English, while functionally the supplement, is imbued with the position of life in a dialectic that disfavors death. To further this end, they dismiss the connection between word and meaning as arbitrary and disavow mystic traditions that hold otherwise:

To the Hebrew, then, as to most Orientals, every words appeared to have in itself a divine primaeval character, and to retain some aroma of the creative breath.¹⁷⁶

The early Fathers, the mediaeval Doctors, and the Divines of the Reformation were all united in their admiration of the exploit of Adam when he named the animals brought to him by Jehovah, and they accepted the history of language in the light of this exploit.¹⁷⁷

While natural languages are *believed* to possess an originary vitality, as Ogden and Richards write, this is mere backward superstition- dying and soon to be extinct. This distancing of themselves from the “early Fathers” is an attempt to plant themselves firmly on secular and modern (and therefore, scientific) ground that will give fruit to their revolutionary new language:

A new Science, the Science of Symbolism, is now ready to emerge, and with it will come a new educational technique. Language is the most important instrument we possess. At present we attempt to acquire and to impart a knowledge of its use by mimicry, by intuition, or by rule of thumb, in contented ignorance of its nature. It is not by his own efforts that the modern child is in so many ways better equipped than Aristotle; for such improvement must be the result of co-operative endeavour.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923), 79.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 110

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 381.

The agency that grants life to language, as suggested by this paragraph, is no longer that of the Divine, but Science.

At this point, Ogden and Richard's attempted schism between the religious and the scientific returns to the concerns that Scholem lays out in his letters. Scholem's vocal opposition to the secularization of Hebrew, that is, the adapting of Hebrew for use as a national language and for international communication, is in part due to belief in the "Word-Magic" that Ogden and Richards deny. Hebrew, Scholem thought, is the language of God's people, and most probably related closely to the Adamic tongue. By placing new meanings onto an existing, sacred signifier-signified relationship, profanation occurs and an apocalyptic fate is invited upon the heads of his people because the original signified is invoked every time the language is utilized for secular purposes. In adapting a sacred language for common use, Scholem envisions miscommunication, confusion, violence, death. The easy contrast is Ogden and Richard's language project, which is the adapting of an existing language for common use to *avoid* miscommunication, confusion, violence, death. Yet both rely on the belief of a center that arbitrates the trueness of a language, be it God or Science, and the need for a return to a purer speech. Ogden's implicit appeal to the figure of the sacred through Science is his answer to how Basic English can attain "life."

Derrida's critique in "The Eyes of Language" of Scholem's letter when he problematizes Scholem's view that language is corrupted and contaminated by technology is useful in explicating the dialectic. Returning to the prior discussion of life of language joins this discussion to how Derrida writes on the difficulties of maintaining this dialectic:

...the dissociation between originary and technological language- and therefore the implicit devalorization of technology as profanatory, secularizing, contaminating

exteriority- also aims at a Christian idealism, an interiorization of spiritual meaning separated from the body in general, from time, from the letter or the carnal signifier.¹⁷⁹

Ogden and Richard's Basic International English, as a "technological" language, may appear profanatory from the perspective of Scholem. However, Ogden and Richard's divorce of the "carnal signifier" from "spiritual meaning" by asserting that the relationship between word and meaning is arbitrary speaks to Derrida's critique. Moreover, Derrida's remark on the alliance of technicism and idealism goes towards accounting for the similarity in configuration between Scholem and Ogden's positions on language despite seemingly irreconcilable roots.

The remarkable similarities shared by Ogden's project of Basic International English and Scholem's desire to seal the secularization of sacred Hebrew points to a larger intersection between the artificial language movement and the theological. Derridian critique of Babel is productive in explicating the problematic underpinnings of such projects – the desire for the universal is not without violence. As Derrida notes in "Des Tours De Babel," God's violence "ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism" of the Semites in their attempt to found "a universal tongue and unique genealogy."

¹⁸⁰ To attempt to undo God's violence is to unbind his seal; colonial violence, held in abeyance, is unleashed.

Thus, the injunction against violence – the conflict of war – implicit in the mission of artificial languages performs a double bind. To obey this injunction is to disobey. The movement of the universal is implicated in the proper and the untranslatable. Even as artificial languages attempt to occult and deny the proper, the untranslatable, they owe the debt of their existence to the figure of Babel. Babel-as-name, Babel-as-event provides the space for them to flourish. Their

¹⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002), 211.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 105

connect to the Babelic opens a window for Derridian critique on Babel to be mobilized upon their substance.

Conclusion

Not *everything* can be translated...

- George Steiner, *After Babel*

Derrida's critique of Babel, and his explication of the various fragments of the Babelic configuration is a critique of translation and conversely, of attempts to render translation obsolete. The creators of artificial languages, assuming Babel as catastrophe, attempt to undo this disaster by promising an end to the Babelic. Translation is necessitated by imperfect language, moreover opening up the space for damage through miscommunication. A purely divine or the purely scientific language destroys the need for translation. Yet as Derrida suggests, such purity and the possibility of becoming free from the imperfections of language is most likely a fantasy.

The analysis of artificial languages, with their goal of reuniting Man through a common speech, through the Derridian lens speaks broader movements of attempted and inclusion through language and exchange. The questions of scope and interpretation of world literature return to the movement of the Babelic. We are divided by national literature; the advent of transnational world literature returns us to a single denominator of literariness, though we must still struggle and search for a kind of arbitration. Such a movement is already explicit in transnational organizations and treaties: international commerce unites through the translation of need into the monetary; worth is measured by metrics of productivity.

The discussion of stakes here are signposts to roads yet untaken. The fantasy of a pure communication unveiling a community of man speaks to the language of diplomacy and international pacts. Peace must be perpetuated, but in what language? What is pure language, anyway? There is a paradoxical rejection of technological contamination, yet an embrace of the

scientific as the embodiment of Man's rationalism. Reading taxonomy, a product of the scientific revolution, as translation contains fascinating implications for reading colonial and post-colonial histories. The drive to translate botany and languages yet unknown into systematic categories seems not without the violence of interpretation; yet resistance to this translation is perhaps the violence of disenfranchisement. These paradoxes of competing truth claims could bear closer examination. Perhaps an essential cornerstone to this thesis left unexplored is the connection between hope and the apocalyptic. Finally, the motif of the abyss recurs again and again throughout the texts critiqued by Derrida – in Benjamin, Scholem, Rousseau, Nietzsche. What signifies the abyss, a yawning void, in texts relevant to the verticality and presence of Babel-as-tower? The relationship between the abyss and language across these different authors could prove productive in deepening the movements hinted at in this thesis.

If one were to consider the proposition that interpretation is translation, then perhaps my attempt to unravel Babel as a metaphor of metaphor, a translation of translation, is doomed to incomprehension. As Derrida writes, Babel is, first, a proper name. The confusion of contradictory voices present in the proper name proliferate beyond human grasp. The violence of interpretation that I bring to bear against Babel cannot neither completely outrage nor exhaust the excess of meaning that the name Babel contains. Yet as Walter Benjamin writes in "The Task of the Translator," "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them."¹⁸¹ His discussion of translatability points to the hope of translation, even if not such translation cannot be performed now, or even if not achievable by mortal hand. My work, perhaps naively, can only live through such hope.

¹⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 70.

Bibliography

Auerbach, Erich. "Philology and *Weltliteratur*." trans. Marie and Edward Said. *The Centennial Review*, Vol XIII, No. 1, Winter 1969.

Dimock, Wai Chee. "Planetary Time and Global Translation: Context in Literary Studies." *Common Knowledge* 9:3, Duke University Press, 2003.

The holy Bible, King James version. Accessed 17 April, 2009. Available from <http://etext.virginia.edu/kjv.browse.html>

Fyler, John M.. *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975)

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968)

Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours De Babel" in *Acts of Religion*. ed. Gil Anidjar (New York : Routledge, 2002)

Scholem, Gershom. "Confession on the Subject of Our Language" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. and trans. Gil Anidjar. (New York : Routledge, 2002)

Derrida, Jacques. "The Eyes of Language" in *Acts of Religion*. ed. Gil Anidjar (New York : Routledge, 2002)

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)

Derrida, Jacques. "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name" in *The Ear of the Other*. trans. Avital Ronell. ed. Christie V. McDonald. (New York: Schoken Books, 1985)

Kant, Immanuel and Derrida, Jacques. "On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy" in *Raising the tone of philosophy : late essays by Immanuel Kant, transformative critique by Jacques Derrida*. trans. John Leavey Jr.. ed. Peter Fenves. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003)

The Oxford English Dictionary. *fragment*, *n*. Accessed 26 April, 2009 at:
http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50089350?query_type=word&queryword=fragment

Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978)

Large, Andrew. *The Artificial Language Movement*. (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985)

Slaughter, Mary M.. *Universal languages and scientific taxonomy in the seventeenth century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)

Richards, I. A.. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. (London: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930)

Ogden, C. K. and Richards, I. A.. *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the influence of Language upon Thought and of The Science of Symbolism*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923)

Ogden, C. K.. *The System of Basic English*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934)

Koeneke, Rodney. *Empires of the Mind: I. A. Richards and Basic English in China, 1929 – 1979*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)

Richards, I. A.. *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition*. (London : K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1932)