Not far from the venue of the Tenth International James Joyce Symposium is a church, Vor Frelsers Kirke, with a superb eighteenth-century spire, so constructed that around the outside of it a stair spirals disconcertingly to the top. There is no truth, my guidebook reassures me while inviting me to make the ascent ("in good weather only"), in the legend that the builder fell to an untimely death from his newly completed but not entirely stable tower. But if the story is untrue, how has it gained sufficient currency to merit an official denial in a guidebook? And why, in any case, should a guidebook, whose function is to enhance my pleasure by giving me facts about the objects I see, waste its space with a legend I am told to dismiss as false?

Evidently, the story of the hapless builder, irrespective of its historical accuracy, has a vivid appeal which strongly colors the sightseer’s experience of the fantastic spire—an appeal that springs no doubt from its connection with the wide-ranging family of mythic and literary texts that work and rework the motif of the building of the tower and the consequent fall. (Leaving James Joyce out of it for the moment, two texts we might think of are the eleventh chapter of Genesis and the ballad of Tim Finnegan.) One way of representing the force of this motif is to see it as a parable which teaches the virtue of humility: to build a tower, or to climb a ladder, is to attempt to rise above one’s proper station, and the dizziness that seizes the mortal who ascends to such heights is the voice of a god—a jealous god, no doubt—who feels his mastery threatened; or, in more modern terms, it is the inner voice that whispers to us, just at the fatal moment, that our technology can never be adequate to our desires.

But we must remind ourselves of the alternative construction which could be placed upon the myth. The tower from which the
builder falls is one which has reached the very limits of human capacity; one from which the builder did not fall would, by virtue of that fact, be less lofty than it might be. Part of the attractiveness of these stories about builders—the sons of Noah, Tim Finnegan, the builder of the spire of Vor Frelser Kirke—is that they invite us to take pleasure in humanity's capacity to arouse the envy of the gods, in the fact that our desires can always outstrip our technology. From this perspective, the Fall is necessarily fortunate, not, as the Christian tradition would have it, because it brings forth otherwise unattested Divine mercy but because by its own daring it makes manifest the prohibition it transgresses against, and in doing so exposes the hidden power structure—whether we call it the force of God or the force of Nature—within which humanity is obliged to operate.

One of the significant differences between the myth of the first Fall and that of Babel is that the latter is the story of a collective struggle with Divine power, not an individual one. And what the myth identifies as the source of strength of the collective is language; it is this that makes possible the development of the technology of brickmaking, described in some detail in Genesis Chapter 11, which leads in turn to the plan to "build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven" (Authorized Version, 11.4). But this, interestingly, is not the ultimate aim; we seem to circle back to the power of language, since the purpose of the magnificent city (Hebrew "Babel" is, of course, Greek "Babylon") is to "make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (11.4). Their fears are, it turns out, quite justified: the Lord reflects on the power that a shared language gives to a community, and is not happy with the prospect. "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" (11.6). He therefore confounds the language of the people, and thus fragments the collective and takes away its power. They do indeed make a name for themselves, but the name is "Babel," which the Yahwist associates punningly with Hebrew "balal," or confusion.

The myth of Babel expresses a yearning for a condition of perfect mutual intelligibility, for a language of total communication shared by all humanity; a utopian community in which no misunderstanding could occur and therefore no strife. Humankind is prevented from attaining such a state not by its own weakness but by a law imposed from outside; to be thus would be to be as gods. Language is therefore
our bane when it could be our salvation. Babel signifies both the imaginable possibilities and the actual limitations of collective existence; the word "Babel" in English has come to mean both "a visionary scheme" and "a confused medley of sounds."

It's a commonplace that our post-Babelian condition is more fully evinced in *Finnegans Wake* than in any other linguistic artifact; one of its most notorious features is the cacophony of various languages, sometimes miraculously chiming but more often multiplying dissonant meanings in a confusion of noises. The tireless work of explicators has reduced that dissonance by showing that what at first sight seems an array of discordant meanings is often an elaborate harmony, and one might say that the vision that (consciously or unconsciously) has encouraged *Wake* explication over the years has been the same one that underlies the Babel myth: the dream of achieving a reading in which all the languages of the *Wake* will speak to one another lucidly and comprehensibly, and thus become one language, a new super-language that will unite divided humanity once more, at least in the aesthetic realm. This vision, the explicatory enterprise assumes, was Joyce's vision: *Finnegans Wake* is his tower of anti-Babel, designed and built to counter the destructive act of the jealous god who drove the nations apart, and to bequeath to the world an artifact which, by making out of the kaleidoscope of languages a new tongue and a new name to hold humanity together, will succeed where the sons of Noah failed. If much of the *Wake* sounds to us as Babelian confusion, this must be—so it is assumed—because we are still locked in our monoglot cultural prisons, lacking the energy and enterprise to follow Joyce in his multilingual architectural feat of total unification.

We are not, of course, talking only about the interpretation of *Finnegans Wake*; what is at issue is the hermeneutic drive itself, the urge to translate what is apparently "confused" into a language which will be entirely transparent, to unweave the polyglot textual fabric into the monoglot thread. The hermeneutic hope is that the Lord will be more lenient this time, and allow the city of mutual intelligibility to be built by means of the new technologies of interpretation and translation (which are, of course, closely related activities). The Babelian texture of the *Wake* offers the greatest possible challenge to the interpreter and translator, one fundamental problem being, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out in discussing Joyce's use of the Babel myth ("Two Words" 155, "Des Tours de
The Wake's Confounded Language

Babel’’ 170–71, and ‘‘Table Ronde’’ 132–33), that the most successful translation/interpretation of Wakean words will, by definition, be the least successful at relaying a fundamental property of the text: its being in more than one language at once. But as long as Joyce’s book is seen, like every other book, as intended for, and amenable to, complete explication, the hermeneutic faith will doubtless survive.

We find, then, that there are two competing uses to which the myth of the fall from the tower might be put; it could be taken as an encouragement to accept the imperfections that surround us (including the impossibility of perfect communication) as the justly imposed and unavoidable condition of our existence, or a call to regard them as something unjustly willed upon us (or culpably allowed by us to come into being) which it is our prime duty as a human collective to overcome. I could respond to my guidebook entry by lamenting the sad tale of architectural ambition outstripping technical capability or by admiring the sacrifice that taught others the way forward to more solidly constructed towers. (Among the larger systems of belief that would tend, respectively, in these directions would be some kinds of Christianity and some kinds of Marxism.) From the first perspective, the language of Finnegans Wake produces an ironic comedy inviting laughter at our shared ridicu­lousness and mutual incomprehension (if not an unreadable tragedy reflecting despair at our hopeless condition); from the second, it constitutes a celebratory comedy demonstrating our potential for imaginative fertility and mutual understanding.

Faced with these two opposing views, we might—following the spirit if not the exact method of Fredric Jameson in The Political Unconscious—look for a more comprehensive perspective which will at once explain the contradicting positions and, without rejecting them, move beyond them. They both, it seems to me, arise from the same conception of language, a conception that cannot be made to cohere with the way language works in practice. Language is widely seen, in both popular and scientific understanding, as funda­mentally and constitutively a matter of intersubjective communi­cation: a procedure of coding and decoding preexisting mental contents, which, if the linguistic machine is working properly, remain unchanged by the passage from one mind to another. The efficiency of the procedure depends on the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified: what matters is that the code is sufficiently complex and subtle to encapsulate all the details of the mental
contents, and iconic or symbolic relationships would only interfere with this. It is arbitrariness that makes possible the existence of more than one language (since there is no signifier more or less appropriate for any given signified), but it is also arbitrariness that makes possible all types of translation (including interpretation, which translates one text into another more readable text), since the mental contents are assumed to remain constant, and only the way they are encoded varies.

To hold this view of the nature of language is, of course, to be puzzled and disappointed by the empirical evidence, which suggests that the communicative procedure fails more often than it succeeds; there always seems to be some contingent reason why a given utterance is unable to yield wholly and truly its burden of meaning. (I leave aside the vexed problem of how one would ascertain that anything that could be called a completely successful act of communication had in fact occurred.) Particularly unsatisfactory in its failure to communicate a stable preexisting meaning is the written utterance, and most of all what is called the "literary text"—with Finnegans Wake as the worst offender of all. Hence the two attitudes I've sketched: resignation at the necessary imperfections of a nonideal world, or hope that technological improvements (better languages, more efficient channels of communication) or sociopolitical advances (increased human solidarity, perhaps) might eventually reveal to us language in its true form, as it should always have been.

A different view of language, however, would not produce this disparity between the idea and the experience, a view that I won't expatiate on now since it's become familiar, in various versions, in the writing of a number of philosophers and literary theorists, but could be broadly described in terms of its rejection of the communication model and its emphasis instead on language's constituting and conditioning force. Not just an instrument neutrally serving objects and intentions, language operates in and upon the world in a host of different ways, and is already implied in any possible mental content. The literary text, far from being the most aberrant instance of language, is the instance that reveals its nature most clearly, as an endlessly retranslatable complex of signifiers, existing as part of a set of public, and political, institutions, themselves caught in a process of constant transformation. And, in this respect, Finnegans Wake is the most typical and the most revealing of all literary texts.
The myth of Babel, from this wider perspective, is a story western culture tells itself to account for the failure of its own model of language to match up to the reality it experiences; language has to be judged as fallen from its true self, whether necessarily or unnecessarily, if the belief in this model is to be sustained. (The difference between intralingual and interlingual failure of comprehension is not a significant one; we can take the story of Babel as referring to the institution of several languages or to the making imperfect of the communicative processes within any single language.) But *Finnegans Wake* retells the myth, a number of times, from a different perspective: neither lamenting language's fall nor trying to secure its recovery, it finds its pleasures in the knowledge that language, by its very nature, is unstable and ambiguous. (The irreverent treatment of artificial world languages like Esperanto and Volapük in the *Wake* functions in a similar way.) Once the belief in a pure communicative language has been abandoned, the sharp difference between monoglot and polyglot discourse disappears; any language is many languages—a Babel of registers, dialects, older and newer forms, slang and borrowed items, accents and idiosyncracies—and all that the *Wake* does is to extend this logic to its comic extreme. True, no single reader could assimilate all the *Wake*'s languages; but no single hearer could assimilate all the languages—no doubt confused and contradictory languages—that I give utterance to, knowingly or unknowingly, each time I produce an everyday statement.

As Laurent Milesi points out in an informative article entitled “The Babelian Idiom of *Finnegans Wake,*” there is a reference early in the *Wake* to the traditional number of nations—and hence languages—on earth, a reference which reminds us that a linguistic item will have as many meanings as there exist codes in which to place it:

So you need hardly spell me how every word will be bound over to carry three score and ten toptypsical readings throughout the book of Doublends Jined. (20.13-18)

But this, of course, is true of every word of every book, not just of our circular story of Dublin’s giant. Babel is a condition of all language, not just that of the *Wake,* and it is this that provides language with its power to give pleasure and to change the world (by no means incompatible functions). In Joyce’s text, the myth of the fall from the shaky tower of Babel may be read, like all the
many falls in the book, not as a moral lesson in humility, not as a symbol of defeated human aspiration, but as an instance—comically transformed—of the way we represent to ourselves, in language, language’s refusal to be a mere instrument of transcendent intentions or desires.

Milesi reminds us of an anecdote of Budgen’s which is worth quoting in full:

Joyce once told me (it was during the composition of *Finnegans Wake*) that he thought he had found the meaning of the Tower of Babel story. If I had done my bounden duty I should have been ready with “what?” and “how?” and “tell,” but, slow of wit and more apt to ruminate than to ask, I let the occasion slide, so that what Joyce thought was the true inwardness of the Biblical story is anybody’s guess. (“Resurrection” 12)

It is perhaps just as well that Budgen’s inquisitiveness failed him at this point, since *Finnegans Wake* itself stands as a much richer exegesis of the story of Babel than could have been communicated by even the most meticulous biographer.

NOTE

1. Tim Finnegan’s upward mobility is also related to both language and bricks: the ballad informs us that “He had a tongue both rich and sweet, / An’ to rise in the world he carried a hod.”

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