

Babel: A Fragment

“I thought you said it would be done today. Am I mistaken?”

“No, I thought it would, but as you can plainly see, it is not yet done.”

“Yes, of course I see that. The point isn’t that it isn’t done today, the point is that you said it would be done today, and yet it isn’t. There’s a difference.”

“I’m sorry. It seems that it is taking longer than I anticipated.”

“Clearly. We’ve had this same conversation before though, haven’t we? Two weeks ago. It wasn’t finished then either.”

“But I’ve made progress.”

“Yes, progress ... but too little progress, I’m afraid. Far too little.”

“You like your job here, don’t you? I mean, you want to continue working here, don’t you?”

“Yes, I like both the work and my colleagues here.”

“Good. And you understand that what we do here is important, don’t you? I mean, you understand that this isn’t just a job.”

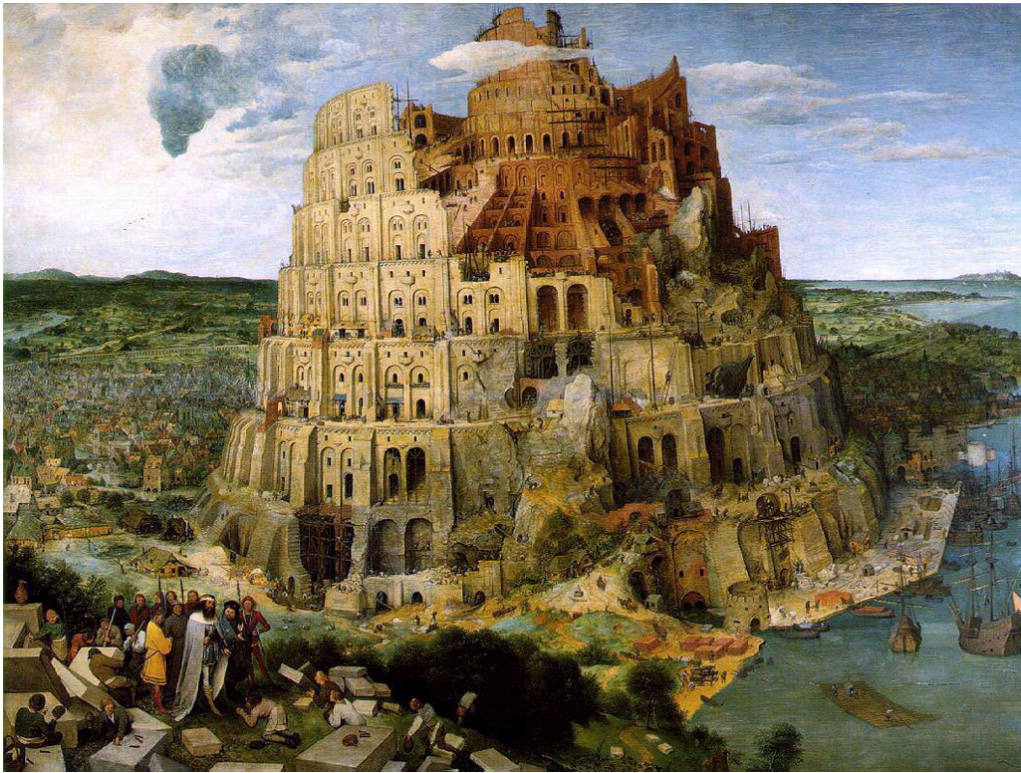
“Yes.”

“A people will never understand themselves unless they first understand the language that connects them, makes them a people. By cataloging each and every word of our common heritage in exquisite detail, we etch a picture of the strings—nay the ropes—that chain us together in our common humanity.”

“Of course.”

“And how much longer do you think we can continue without perfectly understanding our common ties? A week, a year, a lifetime? Isn’t there enough war and strife in the world? Let me just briefly tell you a story.

“Just a few days days ago on my way to work I was stopped in the street by an unemployed man. ‘Change for a man hard on his luck?’ he said. And I thought, what exactly does he mean by *change*? I was, after all, wearing my new houndstooth mackinaw, and you know how hard virgin wool is to come by these days. Did he want a change of clothing, perhaps my jacket? Or did he want some loose coins from my pocket? From his demeanor and visage, it really could have been either. No way for a chap to know. Of course giving over the mackinaw was completely out of the question. So I shot him. In the head. Graveyard dead. It was truly unavoidable. Clearly this



The Tower of Babel (c. 1563) Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

unemployed man wasn't able to communicate his desires unambiguously, and I feared talking about it would only inflame his passions. Better to end the conversation quickly than to let it devolve into an interminable discussion. Well, the police came and I had to explain everything. Fortunately, I'm a member of the Ministry and thus we were able to put the matter to rest without delay, after only an hour or so.

"I hope you see the point of this story."

"Yes, I think so. You're saying that life is full of change, and we can't expect that things will stay as they are forever. And, maybe that life is short."

"No! You really are a dunderhead, aren't you? The point of the story is that I was late for work. And to be late is unacceptable. Had I taken the time to talk with this man, I probably would have been even later. When we

finish our project, the exact meaning of every word, and its complete history, with examples, will be available to the public. Not just a dictionary, but an encyclopedia of words. Misunderstandings like this won't occur. Don't think that this is an isolated instance. I assure you, it happens everyday. And it's sad. I was late getting into work, and that was just unnecessary. It all could have been avoided. When we are done, language—the glue that binds each man to every other man—will be fully defined and available to everyone. That unemployed man in the street thirsted for linguistic purity and definiteness. He hungered for the proper words to express himself. He paid taxes for it. And everyday that you take to finish your research is another day that he will be mute, silent, unable to speak for himself. Another day that someone will be late for work, or get the wrong sandwich at the deli, or spend an extra few minutes explaining directions to a cab driver. Those minutes add up. Not to put pressure on you, but really, your delay is tearing the very fabric of society. Can you hear it—the silent rip as our unity fragments? It deafens me. Frankly, I don't know how you can stand it.”

The man scratched his ear.

“I hope that this conversation has been helpful for you and that we understand each other now. I don't want to have to talk to you about this again.”

The man nodded.

After the manager had left the office, the man returned to his work.

Thermonuclear wasn't such a common word, and it didn't have such a long history, but getting all of its uses and nuances just right nevertheless challenged him.

But the man thought, what the manager didn't talk about was what if he got something wrong? Might not that cause a misunderstanding?

And how many people would be late for work then?

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