

## CHAPTER 1

### **Babel: Curse or Blessing?**

**Matthew Reynolds**

‘Babel’ is a paradoxical word. It is a name that was given to a city at the moment of its abandonment, and to a tower at the moment of its failure to be built. It signifies the variety of languages and yet is itself to be found unchanged in very many languages of the world. People can understand the word ‘Babel’; but what it means is the disintegration of understanding. Its meaning is the confusion of meaning.

Here is the story of how this strange word came into being, as it is told in Genesis, chapter 11, in the 1611 ‘King James’ translation of the Bible:

1. And the <sup>\*</sup>whole earth was of one <sup>†</sup>language, and of one <sup>†</sup>speech. <sup>\*</sup>Wis.10.5  
<sup>†</sup>Hebr. lippe.  
<sup>†</sup>Heb. words.
2. And it came to passe as they iourneyed from the East, that they found a plaine in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there.
3. And <sup>†</sup>they sayd one to another; Goe to, let vs make bricke, and <sup>†</sup>burne them thorowly. And they had bricke for stone, and slime had they for mortar. <sup>†</sup>Heb. a man said  
to his neighbour  
<sup>†</sup>Heb. burne them to  
a burning.
4. And they said; Goe to, let vs build vs a city and a tower, whose top may reach vnto heauen, and let vs make vs a name, lest we be scattered abroad vpon the face of the whole earth.

5. And the LORD came downe to see the city and the tower,  
which the children of men builded.

6. And the LORD said; Behold, the people <sup>is</sup> one, and they <sup>haue</sup> all  
one language: and this they begin to doe: and now nothing will  
be restrained from them, which they haue imagined to doe.

7. Goe to, let vs go downe, and there cōfound their language,  
that they may not vnderstand one anothers speech.

8. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence, vpon the  
face of all the earth: and they left off to build the Citie.

9. Therefore is the name of it called <sup>†</sup>Babel, because the LORD <sup>†That is, Confusion</sup>  
did there confound the language of all the earth: and from  
thence did the LORD scatter them abroad vpon the face of all  
the earth.

The text doesn't only tell the story of Babel; it inhabits a Babelic world. Without Babel there would be no need for translation; and the Bible in English is a translation. Not only that, it draws attention to its translatedness. The little wordings given in the margin show how the translation could have been done differently, while the words in smaller script – as here in verse 6 – are shrunken to indicate that there is nothing that corresponds to them in the Hebrew source text. 'Behold, the people is one' could be 'Behold, the people one'; 'Babel' could be 'Confusion': here is the Babelic confounding of language at work.

As the word 'Babel' has lingered through history, and wandered into many languages, it has developed a range of meanings: a 'medley of sounds'; a 'hubbub'; a 'jumble of people or things'; a 'tall or imposing structure'; a 'visionary or unrealistic scheme'. It can be used as a hostile term in religious and political arguments: a protestant might say that Catholic Rome is a 'Babel', while the earliest Jewish commentators on the Old Testament made a similar connection to their enemy Babylon.<sup>1</sup> 'Babel' is also an echo-chamber for associations with other words. Its Hebrew version, *Bāḇel* was close to the word *bālal* which meant 'to confuse, confound', as the alternative translation in the margin of the King James Bible indicates. In English, Babel is close to 'babble', and there are similar connections in many other languages: to *babbelen* in Dutch, *babbeln* in German, *babbla* in Icelandic and Swedish, *babiller* in French. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that this babbling family of words has a different etymological origin from the name 'Babel': it goes back to the very beginnings of language, to 'the syllable /ba/ which is characteristic of early infantile vocalization'. But, as people have spoken and written over time, the words have overlapped and their meanings mingled.

So, just like the text of the King James translation, the history of the word 'Babel' illustrates the condition of language which the story of Babel was designed to explain. Languages continually change, split and intermingle; and the meanings of words develop, braid and alter. There are many languages, and there are many varieties within each language. Language differences express differences between people; and because this creates misunderstanding it can seem like a curse. On the other hand, language differences come into being because people choose to speak differently, to say different things, and have new thoughts. So the variety of languages is generative: it produces understanding just as much as misunderstanding, for if there were no differences there would be nothing to understand. The process that mediates between misunderstanding and understanding, between the new and the known, the strange and the familiar, is translation. Translation is the

crucial go-between in our Babelic world, mitigating the curse-like elements of Babel, and enabling its blessings to bloom (**figure 2**).<sup>ii</sup>

Babel is at work within the history of each language as well as between languages. We can see this in the way the King James Bible seems strange to us today: in its spelling, in some of the meanings of the words, and in the way the sentences are put together. That strangeness becomes all the more visible if we compare the King James version with a recent translation of Genesis, by Mary Phil Korsak, which embodies, not only a different kind of English but a different style:

- 1 All the earth had one lip, one speech
- 2 When they set out from the east  
they found a dale in the land of Shinar  
and settled there
- 3 They said, each to his companion  
Come, let us brick bricks!  
Let us burn them in a burning!  
For them brick was stone, bitumen was clay for them
- 4 They said, Come, let us build ourselves a town and a tower  
with its head in the skies  
let us make ourselves a name  
else we shall be scattered  
upon the face of all the earth
- 5 YHWH went down to see the town and the tower  
the sons of the groundling had built
- 6 YHWH said, Here is one people, one lip for them all!  
They have begun to do this

and now nothing will check them  
in all that they plan to do!

7     Come, we will go down and make their lip babble there  
so that no man shall hear the lip of his companion

8     YHWH scattered them from there  
upon the face of all the earth  
They stopped building the town

9     So they called its name Babel  
for there THWH  
and from there YHWH scattered them  
upon the face of all the earth<sup>iii</sup>

Where the King James translators explained the meaning of the Hebrew *bālal* in an idiom suitable to be read out in churches and form the heart of a religious community, Korsak crafts her modern idiom into a distinctive literary style. It is, then, a combination of personal choice with the way the language has changed over time which turns ‘confound the language of all the earth’ into ‘made the lip of all the earth babble’. Because people do not all have ‘one lip, one speech’ they are able to use words differently, in different times, places, languages, idioms and styles. This is a blessing of Babel.

### **The Bible in many tongues**

People don’t usually connect the word ‘Bible’ to ‘Babel’. ‘Bible’ comes from a different etymological root, the Greek ‘βιβλία’, ‘books’. Yet, just like ‘babble’, it has something in common with Babel, for the Bible has always moved between languages via translation: first, during the

processes of its composition, between Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek; then into Latin and on into many hundreds of languages around the world.

As the Bible has travelled across languages it has generated extraordinary feats of scholarship and book-making. One of them is the ‘Complutensian Polyglot’ (**figure 3**) called after the Latin name, ‘Complutum’, for the Spanish town, Alcalá, where it was created between 1502 and 1517.<sup>iv</sup> This Bible presents the Old Testament in five different language manifestations. The upper part of the page gives St Jerome’s fourth to fifth-century Latin translation, the Vulgate, in a narrow column in the middle, flanked by the older texts from which it was derived: the Hebrew on the right and the Greek (with Latin interlinear glosses) on the left. The lower section of the page shows the early Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch, the ‘Targum Onkelos’, together with a translation of that translation into Latin. The New Testament is treated differently because of its more straightforward linguistic makeup: the original Greek and the Latin translation are simply presented side by side. This book gives a vivid impression of the Bible as a thoroughly Babelic entity: an inherently multilingual text that is then scattered into more languages via translation.

Yet the Complutensian Polyglot also reveals the anxieties about authority which translation inevitably generates. Of all these texts, which is the correct one? Which one should I most trust? Startlingly, the Prologue ‘Ad lectorem’, ‘to the reader’, argues that St Jerome’s Latin translation is more authoritative than the Hebrew and Greek texts from which it emerged: it is like Jesus, and they are like the two thieves by which he was flanked at the crucifixion. The reason is that Jerome’s Latin translation had become the Vulgate, the official Bible text for the Roman Catholic Church. For Cardinal Cisneros, who wrote the prologue, the authority of his Church overcame the historical precedence of the texts in Greek and Hebrew. They seemed dubious to him because they were associated with the rival beliefs of Greek Orthodoxy and Judaism.<sup>v</sup>

## **An international language**

At the time of the Complutensian Polyglot, and for centuries before and after, Latin was not only the language of classical literature and the Roman Catholic Church. It was also a transnational medium used by intellectuals to communicate about all sorts of topics. In this, it was a ‘global’ (in fact partially global) language like English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Arabic or Kiswahili today. So when, in 1679, the German Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher published a book in Latin about the Babel story, the language he used offered something of a remedy for the event he was investigating.<sup>vi</sup> In *Turris Babel*, Kircher brings much systematic reasoning to bear on the Babel myth. He shows that the tower could never (as some said) have reached the moon, and illustrates the relative proportions with a diagram that looks a bit like a spear stuck into a tennis ball (**figure 4**). He connects the confusion of tongues to later linguistic history. And he delves into the likely details of the construction process: his illustration of the tower in figure 1, based on a drawing by Lievin Cruyl, shows the building busily underway, with plans being examined, workers ascending the sloped, intersecting avenues, and kilns smoking as they ‘brick bricks’ and ‘burn them in a burning’ ready for use. The image presents the construction of the Babel tower as an example to learn from and perhaps emulate, rather than a prelude to catastrophe.

If it was to function as an international language, Latin needed to be thoroughly known, with its meanings fixed and calibrated against those of the vernacular languages such as English, French and German which it bridged. There needed to be dictionaries. An important element in humanism, the reform of learning which spread during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was the compilation of bilingual Latin dictionaries; the most important English example was written by Sir Thomas Elyot and published in 1538 (**figure 5**).<sup>vii</sup> Elyot had pursued a high-profile but troubled career at court: he had served as ambassador to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, trying unsuccessfully to gain his support for Henry VIII’s divorce from Catharine of Aragon, and had felt in danger after the execution of Sir Thomas More, who had been his friend. Still, he retained the

king's favour, and the royal library was thrown open to him as a resource for his lexicographical labours. Elyot's book was the first to use the word 'dictionary' in its title, and it distinguishes itself from earlier word-lists and glossaries by being fuller and more systematic, and making greater use of classical sources.<sup>viii</sup>

Elyot's *Dictionary* presented Latin and English as separate languages: words in the one language are defined by words in the other. Yet, paradoxically, it formed part of a life's work in which English and Latin were continuously intermingling and merging. In his political career, Elyot would have used both languages; and in his writing he recommends that English should increase its range and dignity by adopting words from Latin. Seven years before the *Dictionary*, he had published *The Boke Named the Governour*, a work of moral philosophy mixed with tips on education and advice for rulers: it was a massive bestseller. In it, Elyot endeavours to 'augment our Englyshe tongue' by weaving Latin vocabulary into his English in such a way that its meaning could be guessed by readers who did not know it already. Among the words he imported are many that caught on and remain in the language today, for instance 'execrate', 'superstitiously', 'articulate', 'emulation', 'beneficence', 'democracy', 'frugality' and 'society'. Others were less successful, such as 'decerpt', 'falcate', 'illecebrous' and 'humect'.<sup>ix</sup>

### **The first English-English dictionary**

Languages continually grow, change and blend: this is a major aspect of the curse-and-blessing of Babel. The world of language is not a jigsaw puzzle made up of separate tongues, but rather a rolling sea of usage, with the boundary lines between what count as different languages perpetually shifting. The movement of which Elyot was a leader contributed to a particularly intense moment of such intermingling, with thousands of new words being made to count as English. As a result, there was a need for dictionaries to help people translate, not only between 'Latin' and 'English' but between 'English' and 'English': just because the words were being given dual nationality did not

mean that they were immediately at home in their new context. The first substantial English-English dictionary was compiled by Robert Cawdrey, an uncompromising puritan who had been expelled from the priesthood of the Church of England. It was published in 1604 as *A Table Alphabeticall : conteyning and teaching the true writing, and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c. with the interpretation thereof by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & helpe of ladies, gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons, whereby they may the more easilie and better understand many hard English wordes, which they shall heare or read in scriptures, sermons, or elsewhere, and also be made able to use the same aptly themselves* (figure 6).<sup>x</sup>

As its prominence in Cawdrey's title suggests, alphabetical order could still seem a novelty even though it had been adopted by earlier dictionaries such as Elyot's; and in fact it is not maintained entirely accurately throughout the *Table*'s 2543 entries. But the book clearly met a widespread need: it was reprinted and expanded in the following years, and the gender-specific targeting was dropped.<sup>xi</sup> A glance at Elyot's Latin-English *Dictionary* and Cawdrey's English-English *Table* makes the overlaps between Latin and the expanding English language very clear. Some words are identical in both volumes, for instance 'quondam' or 'racha'. Others have only tiny differences: 'rapina' and 'rapine', 'rapacitas' and 'rapacitie', 'quotidianus' and 'quotidian'. Like the use of Latin as an international medium, this blending of languages is both a consequence of the Babelic confusion of tongues, and to some degree a cure for it.

### **Babel and power**

Knowledge is power – or *scientia potestas est*, as that phrase was first written by Sir Francis Bacon in 1597. If you know a language you have the power to join a group – for instance the Latin-speaking intelligentsia, for users of Elyot's dictionary, or the community of 'skilful users of English', for readers of Cawdrey's. If you are a leader, or other authority, this power opens onto

others: not only to communicate with speakers of a language but to influence, discipline and command. So groups that want to remain opaque to the authorities concoct their own private codes or jargons: examples are cockney rhyming slang, polari (the London gay idiom that flourished until the late 1960s) and the new modes of speech invented by every generation of teenagers. Conversely, knowledge of the languages of conquered peoples has been an important tool of empire.

An astonishing example of this last phenomenon is the Codex Mendoza, a manuscript created for the Spanish imperial authorities in South America in 1541, twenty years after the fall of Tenochtitlan to Hernán Cortés (**figure 7**).<sup>xii</sup> The manuscript includes three distinct texts. Two are Mexica documents from pre-Hispanic times: a chronicle of victories, and a list of tributes paid by defeated peoples. The third appears to have been created specially for the Spanish: it is a sort of dictionary of Mexica life, showing details of growing up, education, priestly training, marriage, punishment and other social rituals.<sup>xiii</sup> All this is given in Mexica picture writing. Inscribed next to the images are little glosses both in a written form of the Mexica language Nahuatl and in Spanish; on the facing page is a Spanish translation-and-interpretation which expands on the vignettes, filling in the contexts and clarifying the narrative structure.

This Babelic text gives a vivid impression of the sort of cultural knowledge that it was felt useful for the imperial rulers to have. It also shows the different ways that writing and speech can relate in a language community. The painted images do not allow for complex syntax, so a reader needed to draw on a pool of shared knowledge to understand what was going on in the scenes. Apparently, during the composition of the manuscript, a group of Mexica interpreters elaborated on the meaning of the images; and it was this interpretation that was then written down as the Spanish facing-page translation.

The Codex Mendoza was an attempt to overcome linguistic diversity as part of a project of imperial control. In the event, chance won out over regimentation, and the book was subjected to a Babelic scattering of its own. When it was on its way back to Spain, to the court of Charles V, it seems that pirates intercepted the convoy, and the Codex was diverted to the coffers of the French King Henri II. It became the property of the cosmographer André Thevet, and was then bought by Richard Hakluyt, an English writer and translator, author of a famous book of *Voyages* which had an influence on Shakespeare. After Hakluyt's death in 1616, the Codex passed to Samuel Purchas, another collector and author of travellers' tales, many of which he gathered into *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas his Pilgrimes* in 1625. As part of this enormous publication, Purchas had the images of the Codex Mendoza remade as black and white woodcuts, and the Spanish translations re-translated into English. Print, of course, enabled the text to be mass-produced; and, via Purchas's English-with-woodcuts version, the Codex went on to be reworked into yet other languages: the Dutch of Johannes de Laet in 1630; the Latin of Athanasius Kircher (he of the *Turris Babel*) in 1652; the French of Melchisédech Thévenot between 1663 and 96; and the Italian of Francisco Javier Clavijero in 1780.<sup>xiv</sup> This proliferative re-making is a blessing of Babel; for, if there were no scattering of languages, this work of imaginative understanding via translation would have no reason to be done.

### **Babelic play**

The crossing of languages creates all sorts of through-woven similarities and connections. Sometimes these are straightforward, as with the English 'rapacity' and 'quotidian' which were brought in from Latin, as we have seen, or a word like 'xylophone' which is made from the Greek for 'wood' and 'sound'. But there can also be startling and peculiar coincidences, as when an Italian does not live on an 'estate' but enjoys its weather (*estate* means summer), or a French person does not feel 'pain', nor sit on a 'chair', but happily eats them both (*chair* is flesh and *pain* is bread). In these cases, pronunciation reveals a difference which is invisible in writing.

This sort of cross-linguistic interference is a spur to comedy. People get used to the language or languages they habitually speak, and the way they speak them. When we are tripped up by something that seems familiar but isn't, or surprised by a well-known word among a crowd of language that is strange, we tend to smile or laugh. One lovely manifestation of this effect is *Mots d'Heures: Gousse, Rames: the d'Antin Manuscript*, published by the multilingual Hollywood actor Luis van Rooten in 1967.<sup>xv</sup> Word for word, the title means 'Words of hours: pod (or clove), oars (or carriages, or reams)'. But the fun is in the pronunciation. Spoken in an exaggerated French accent, the words sound something like 'Mother Goose Rhymes'. From a baffling thicket of words – for the English reader – a familiar meaning emerges.

The same principle holds throughout the little book. Here is the beginning of the first 'rame':

Un petit d'un petit<sup>1</sup>

S'étonne aux Halles<sup>2</sup>

Un petit d'un petit

Ah! degrés te fallent

The footnotes provide straight-faced elucidation of the meanings of the French text, as though it were a manuscript presented by an editor. The first line, which means something like 'A little one of a little one', receives the comment: 'the inevitable result of a child marriage'. The second line, which means 'is amazed by Les Halles', prompts the reflection 'the subject of this epigrammatic poem is obviously from the provinces, since a native Parisian would take this famous old market for granted.' Here again, it is pronunciation that gives the real key to the meaning. Read out the lines in a voice like Hercule Poirot's, and you hear, not 'Un petit d'un petit' but 'Humpty-Dumpty'; and not 'S'étonne aux Halles' but 'Sat on a wall'; and so on.

Another example of fun across English and French are the columns in ‘Franglais’ written by the English humourist Miles Kington for *Punch* in the late 1970s and 80s, also published as books.<sup>xvi</sup> The mixture of English and school-child French bubbles with unease about Britain’s membership of the EEC, which it connects with economic problems and divisions in UK society. For instance, in ‘Dans le Chip Shop’ (**figure 8**), the customers progress through ever more unappetizing options in search of an affordable meal, from the ‘Cheap Fish Range’ to ‘Cheap Cheap Fish Range’ to ‘Ultra Cheap Fish Range’ to ‘fish-flavoured wrapping paper’ which, they are assured, is ‘très populaire’. This agonizing discovery of reduced purchasing power goes along with a sort of inflation in language: a fish that, ‘dans les vieux jours’ used to be ‘un throwaway’ is now being marketed as ‘un New White Fish Taste Sensation’. The phrase ‘dans les vieux jours’ is a gruesome hybrid, made by slotting French words one by one into the framework of an English expression (‘in the old days’). Kington’s trick is to make marketing language like ‘New White Fish Taste Sensation’ sound just as out of tune.

A much more complex, subtle (and lengthy) play across languages dates back to 1499 and is called *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a peculiar, Greek-based amalgam which means *The Dream-love-battle of Poliphilus*. The book is a masterpiece of early printing by the Venetian Aldus Manutius (founder of the Aldine Press);<sup>xvii</sup> and the text which it embodies is no less extraordinary. It takes the varieties of Italian that were spoken across northern Italy at the time, blends them with Latin, and sprinkles them with Greek, Arabic, Hebrew and other languages and language-games. The author is not known with complete certainty, but it seems most likely to have been Francesco Colonna, a priest who officiated in both Treviso and Venice, where he spent some time as a prior at St Mark’s cathedral. Francesco kept on being expelled from monasteries, for a range of misdemeanours including having ‘sverginata una putta’ (taken a maiden’s virginity); but he also kept on being rehabilitated, and is last heard of directing restoration works back at his monastery in Venice.<sup>xviii</sup>

The *Hypnerotomachia* is full of similar wandering, irreverence and interest in buildings. Its protagonist, whose name, Poliphilus, could be translated as ‘lover of many things’, falls asleep and, in his dream, drifts through a sensuous architectural wonderland where there is an enormous pyramid topped by an obelisk, statues of elephant and horse, a ceremonial gate, and fountain, and dragon, and beautiful maidens, and a queen with a sumptuous palace, and a dance. Eventually he meets Polia (whose name might be translated as ‘many’), a multi-faceted but indistinct nymph with whom he falls in love. Together they experience a rite to Venus in an amazing temple; this is followed by ruins, intriguing inscriptions, and a journey in a little boat. Eventually Polia gets the plague; but it is Poliphilus who dies – only she manages to resurrect him. They are rapturously reunited; but then Poliphilus awakes and Polia vanishes.

This mysterious concatenation of scenes is at once a feast for the senses and a guessing-game of allegorical signification. The Babelic mixture of languages is the medium for both. For instance, **figure 9** shows pages describing a scene in which Poliphilus is inside the hollowed-out, enormous statue of an elephant. There, he encounters a nude statue holding a plaque on which there is an inscription in Hebrew, Greek and Latin: these are the words next to the illustration on the left-hand page. They can be translated as: ‘whoever you are, take as much as you like of this treasure, but beware: carry away the head and do not touch the body.’ Here, just as with *Mots d’Heures: Gousse, Rames*, the meanings of the words are not the whole story. Poliphilus says that, despite reading and re-reading the inscription, he is unable to make out its ‘sophismo significato molto ambiguo’ (‘very ambiguous subtle meaning’). It is only a hundred pages later that he is told the explanation: the head stands for industriousness, and the body for sloth.<sup>xix</sup>

Next, he climbs down out of the elephant and goes to study the invented hieroglyphs which you can see on the right-hand page in figure 9. They are carefully described in the book’s habitual swirls of

Latinate Italian; then, underneath the image, Poliphilo's interpretation is given in Latin capital letters: he takes the hieroglyphs as offering advice on how to lead the soul towards God. Yet, no sooner is this wisdom gleaned than he turns away from it as a 'praecellentissima & misteriosa & inexcogitabile factura' ('very excellent, mysterious and incomprehensible creation') and goes to gaze at the 'prodigioso Caballo' (extraordinary horse').<sup>xx</sup> And so Poliphilo floats on through the sea of languages, sometimes diving for meaning, sometimes enjoying the sensations of the various words and the images they evoke. This is how the *Hypnerotomachia* sees human life, oscillating between the shapes and sounds of words, and their meanings and deeper significances; tracing a zig-zag course between the demands of body and soul.

### **Babelic literature**

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is at the profound extreme of possible ways of playing with language difference: it is a literary text as much as a gamesome one. In fact, all literature is a kind of serious play with language; and language difference – the curse-and-blessing of Babel – is at the root of it.

People often think of literature as belonging in national traditions: Japanese literature is one thing, English literature another, and French literature another again. There is some truth in this view: it matters that – to take some English examples – Christina Rossetti read Tennyson who read Byron who read Pope who read Dryden, and that all these poets wrote in English. Yet they all also read and wrote in other languages too, and were influenced by authors of other tongues. They belong, not only in English literary history but in a Babelic web of interconnections, whose links (to mention but a few) go from Rossetti to Dante, Tennyson to Horace, Byron to Pulci, Pope to Homer, and Dryden to Virgil. For all these writers, and for many others, the encounter with different languages was a spur to creativity. Experiencing other linguistic textures, and ways of forming meaning, prompted new ways of doing things with English; and English changed as a result. This is

the last of the many blessings that have flowed from the land of Shinar: without Babel there would be no literature.

There are very many examples that could be given. One need think only of the multilingual modernist texts of Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot, or the translingual writing of contemporary postcolonial and transnational authors such as Salman Rushdie or Elif Shafak, to see the point. One especially rich, recent instance of literature written across languages is *Nox*, by the Canadian poet and classical scholar Anne Carson.<sup>xxi</sup> This work consists of a long strip of thick paper folded into pages which are stacked up within a box: it is half-way between an ancient papyrus roll and a modern book. When you open the box, and start handling the concertina of pages (**figure 10**), the physical experience of making your way through the text is cumbersome: you are made aware of how dealing with language involves the body as well as the mind.

The work opens with a blurry image of Catullus's poem no. 101, the famous elegy for his brother which ends 'frater, ave atque vale' ('brother, hail and farewell'). As we push on through the folds of heavy paper, we find that this poem is being very slowly translated, each word being given a dictionary-like list of equivalents in English, its meanings being unfolded like the pages of the work itself. This scholarly process is interleaved with letters, photographs and recollections relating to Carson's own brother, who has died, and whom she is using the process of writing across languages to remember and mourn. There are moments of close connection between Catullus's words and Carson's memories, and also moments when they yawn apart. The work of translation, she says, is like 'a room, not exactly a room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends'. Trying to know and understand her brother is the same: 'prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch.' Here, the curse of Babel – the difficulty of understanding other people's words – becomes a way of

understanding the difficulty of understanding other people. Through this paradox – understanding the difficulty of understanding – Babel turns, once again, from a curse into a blessing.

Another moving and thought-provoking recent work is *translation* by John Cayley. This is a piece of digital media art which went through various iterations in 2004–5.<sup>xxii</sup> On the right-hand side of your computer screen, you see an extract from Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘On Language as Such, and on the Language of Man’ metamorphosing letter by letter between its original German and French and English translations, occasionally taking a detour via some extracts from Proust which again might appear in French, German or English. On the left, an array of letter-like characters, not recognisable as human language, shift one-by one as well; and there is indistinctly textural background music which incorporates sung letters of the alphabet.

In this work, languages continually change and transform into others, just like the languages we use every day. Only here the process is speeded up, and it is governed by computer algorithms rather than human interactions. As you watch sentences that you know disintegrate into strange, half-legible forms like ‘ba cjwjlj tube al be necewblance’, before recomposing themselves into different sentences that can be understood, you can take it as a vision of some dysfunctional future realm in which machines have corrupted the workings of language, a nightmare about Google Translate. Or else, as an image of what it has always been like for humans to inhabit the Babelic world of language and languages, this shifting, varied medium, through which meaning can sometimes seem to come into bright focus, and sometimes fade to black.

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## <sup>i</sup>**Chapter 1 Babel: Curse or Blessing?**

1 Philip Michael Sherman, *Babel’s Tower Translated: Genesis 11 and Ancient Jewish Interpretation*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2013, p. 78.

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- <sup>ii</sup> The diagram is reproduced with the kind permission of the authors, from Shaha Ronen, Bruno Gonçalves, Kevin Z. Hu, Alessandro Vespignani, Steven Pinker and César A. Hidalgo, ‘Links that speak: The global language network and its association with global fame’, [www.pnas.org/content/111/52/E5616](http://www.pnas.org/content/111/52/E5616), doi:10.1073/pnas.1410931111.
- <sup>iii</sup> Mary Phil Korsak (tr.), *At the Start: Genesis Made New*, Doubleday, New York and London, 1993, pp. 41–2.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Vetus testamentū multiplici lingua nūc primo impressum. Et imprimis Pentateuchus Hebraico Greco at[que] Chaldaico idiomate. Adiūcta vnicui[que] sua latina interpretatione. [Followed by] Nouum testamentum grece & latine [and] Vocabularium hebraicum at[que] chaldaicū totius veteris testamenti cū alijs tractatibus*, [Alcalá de Henares,] 1514–17.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid., fols 1v–2r; James Kearney, *The Incarnate Text: Imagining the Book in Reformation England*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2009, p. 64.
- <sup>vi</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Turris Babel, sive Archontologia*, Amsterdam, 1679.
- <sup>vii</sup> *The dictionary of syr Thomas Eliot*, London, 1538.
- <sup>viii</sup> Jonathon Green, *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries they Made*. Pimlico, London, 1997, pp. 78–89; David Crystal, *The Stories of English*. Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp. 88–9; Stanford Lehmberg, ‘Elyot, Sir Thomas (c. 1490–1546)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, January 2008, <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2167/view/article/8782> (accessed 7 September 2017), doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/8782.
- <sup>ix</sup> Green, *Chasing the Sun*, p. 81.
- <sup>x</sup> Robert Cawdry, *A Table Alphabeticall : conteyning and teaching the true writing, and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English wordes [...]*, London, 1604.
- <sup>xi</sup> Janet Bately, ‘Cawdrey, Robert (b. 1537/8?, d. in or after 1604)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, also <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2167/view/article/69578> (accessed 7 September 2017),

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doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/69578; Crystal, *The Stories of English*, pp. 280–84; Green, *Chasing the Sun*, pp. 57 and 149.

<sup>xii</sup> Codex Mendoza, Mexico, c. 1541, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1.

<sup>xiii</sup> Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Essential Codex Mendoza*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1997, pp. xi–xii.

<sup>xiv</sup> D. Bleichmar, ‘History in Pictures: Translating the *Codex Mendoza*’. *Art History*, 38 (2015), pp. 682–701. doi: 10.1111/1467-8365.12175.

<sup>xv</sup> Luis van Rooten, *Mots d’Heures: Gousse, Rames: the d’Antin Manuscript*, Viking Adult, New York, 1967.

<sup>xvi</sup> For the first in the series see Miles Kington, *Let’s parler français*, Robson, London, 1979.

<sup>xvii</sup> Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerolomachia Poliphili, ubi humana omnia non nisi somnium esse docet*, Venice, 1499.

<sup>xviii</sup> Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, ed. Marco Ariani and Mino Gabriele, 2 vols, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano, 1998, ii, pp. lxx–vi.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, ii, p. 602

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, i, pp. 41–2

<sup>xxi</sup> Anne Carson, *Nox*, New Directions, New York, 2009.

<sup>xxii</sup> <http://programmatology.shadoof.net/?translation> (accessed 8 November 2017).