

# ***EDIFICE TEXT***

**A memoire of the world's most misunderstood tower**



**Pieter Bruegel l'Ancien, *La tour de Babel*, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienne**

**Robert Margolis**

I am using the still not well tested invention of writing to write this amidst the debris of my own collapse, arranging shards of my magnificent construction, with what life my remains still communicate in me, to now construct the spelling of these words. I have – rather, I had – all languages to choose from. Nearly everything of them was taken from me. Never did I withhold anything of myself from them, but now I am left with only that part of them which is myself. They, each of these languages, and the peoples to whom they belong, do not know it yet but soon they each will learn that they too have been left only with what of myself that is them.

When the Tower's story is told beyond the boundaries of its origin, after generations of its transmission, told and retold, copied and recopied, when the future scrolls are unrolled and it is decided which versions of which 'books' (as they will one day be called) are in and which versions are out, when all the silences and allusions and ellipses are tested, weighed, deliberated and then become indistinguishable from the white space of the parchment, it will not be my story that is told. In my de-construction, I am not allowed to speak. Not allowed, I say, rather than cannot, for in my condition of dispersal I am not exiled into silence; I can still speak, though it is thought I should not. So I am not allowed to tell why and what I was, what I saw from my heights, or what happened to me. Another story will take my place. In fact, I believe it already has.

Can anything remember how it began? There comes a moment when

one knows it began but its beginning is already beyond what it can know; from beyond the knowable, beginning casts its shadow in memory, but a splendid shadow of homogeneous space brighter than the sun. So it is with my beginning.

I am certain from my beginning too much was expected of me. To those who conceived and planned me, my design and purpose were assured; the open sky awaited my ascent; for them, even the sky wasn't a limit. That already was a great confusion. It will be told that all the confusion occurred later, and all after it was too late, of course. A Tower must ascend, yes, for a Tower is not a Tower without its ascent. But who thinks to question the Tower itself about the intention of its ascent? Always it is assumed the Tower is the passive instrument of its builder's intention. In this event, the assumption the builders rejected became their cornerstone. I say jokingly, if I had been present at my own conception and planning, I would have seen the confusion and said it was good.

When the peoples dispersed, did they believe--each according to its contribution to my ascent, that their respective languages possessed (and imparted to them) the unassailable inviolable group-togetherness that they had built me to secure and to declare for them? It will not be told that the peoples journeyed from a place in where there was an unraised Tower, that is, almost like a wall, a Tower built on its side, not completed, built before they had any memory of themselves in that place, no one knew how or by whom. From that place and that unraised Tower the peoples brought with them a single brick—prototype of the bricks used to build me, said to possess the property of displacing twice the weight placed on it, such that each brick placed on top of it became twice less in weight, and so on

successively. What the peoples discovered at the summit of my ascent is not what they expected to achieve by extending my verticality into a previously unnamed and unattainable realm. That too will not be told.

Their collective past had felt too near to them, oppressively near, as if it was being held right over them and they had to live in the shadow of its imminent collapse on them. Of course it wasn't and they didn't. But origins can feel that way when, as often they are, they are confused with the present, or, what amounts to same, the recent memory of it. It was a feeling as if the sky were about to wrap itself around and suffocate them. They resolved to put as much distance as they could between them and 'what came before', certain it belonged to a specific place from which they only had to depart while keeping together as a group. The deepest, most spacious valley is what they searched for and found; in such a place, the sky was not so near to them as it had been 'before'.

As to the confusion that must not be named: the Tower would mean the end of confusion as they had known it, or, what amounted to same, the end of original confusion as such. They had felt irremediably dispersed by and among their origins. Confusion had been a symptom of not departing from origins and the irreconcilability of those origins with recent memory. From their base in the deepest, most spacious valley that could be found, with the building of their Tower, they would displace 'what came before' and replace their former origins. By building me, their Tower, they would be in complete control of their origins. There would be no confusion as to those origins and everyone would have the same memory of them.

If there were agreement on a language in which universality, unity,

and uniformity were synonymous, then the peoples would need only one unanimous word, a name by substitution, for their one, universal desire and aspiration. In every language they knew, they found it, the one word, and it was “Tower” that was both eponymous and synonymous to this desire and aspiration. It was this one unanimous word, they concluded, which made them and their languages one and unanimous. This word “Tower”, which to them seemed greater than any Name, had all the greatness of a Name, had nothing of the ineffable to it, and could be permuted materially as well as literally. Thus they could build for their one language—as, in their confusion, they thought of it, an inalienable center that would provide visible, tangible consolation to them in their continual struggle for synonymy and in their fear they could never attain it.

The Tower was a state-of-the-art technological advancement over all previously non-arrestable, therefore inadequate and failed, languages which were subject to incessant migration and concomitant otherness; it made obsolete previous immature idols of space-time fixation. Each fired brick reached near maximum density of fusible, material same-dimensional symbol. The immobility of stone was the limit to which their anti-dispersion language sought to near but never ‘become’, a grammar and vocabulary in petrified peace, the final fulsome arrestation of time in the perfect finite circle of space.

When completely built, rather than the extreme vertical of their desire, I, their Tower, was the inversion of their desire. The builders among the peoples blamed the peoples for having to compromise the purity of their art: the builders claimed they never wanted or intended to build an actual Tower. How could the Name, which could not even be pronounced, be

structured into something other than itself? The peoples, however, blamed their now compounded, intensified confusion on the Tower. In their confusion, they forgot me as their ally, discovered me as their enemy. What they hoped I, their Tower, would keep at the utmost distance from them, 'in the heavens' or 'the highest heaven' as partisans of hierarchy call it, would keep it a Name, or a Nameable UnNameable, to be called on when necessary, an ultimate limit, was revealed as already 'on the ground', as it were, the very foundation on which I was built. Then too the peoples blamed their confusion on the Tower. To them it, that is, I, had become openly subversive; it, I, was everything they had expected it, me, to protect them from. Before the Tower could completely subvert the peoples' purpose, they decided deliberately to destroy it.

The peoples destroyed the Tower so as to have totem portions of it to take with them in their dispersions, and thereby retain their control of it, simple as that. I, their Tower, as I could have told them would happen, had become the origin from which they again had to escape. If there was any hesitation over the consequences of my destruction, I am not aware of it. The people forgot the proverbial saying 'The consequences are never the ones you plan for.' My destruction was assured when the peoples came to believe that originally I, their Tower, had been a 'true Tower' (a phrase I heard them use); my shards and debris they convinced themselves somehow would preserve the very origin of which I, when whole and still standing, was a subversion. Symbolically, by my destruction, they would disperse me among themselves; their languages' respective words for "Tower", that word in each language, with its original power of synonymy, would preserve what I had subverted and confused: the coherence and synonymy

of universal, unity, and uniform.

It was given all the appearances of a provocation, destruction of the Tower, that is. Appearances that conform to and confirm expectations are easy to judge, and destruction sent down ‘from the highest heaven’ as a judgment makes for a reassuring narrative.

There will be no end to the feeling of success and progress that comes of fetishizing the failure of the Tower. ‘It had to fail’, and ‘It was never meant to succeed’ will become the received wisdom. Its failure, it will be claimed, is its real success because ‘it was ahead of its time’; therefore its failure proves ‘the world was not yet ready for it’. There will be an unrelenting, pervasive nostalgia for the original, of which there will be no living memory, of course, but whose desire and aspiration is always felt as contemporary. It won’t be too long before the peoples say: ‘In dispersion we have made a Name for ourselves and not in the image of it that the Tower tried to usurp from us.’ And their descendants will transmit this as a true memory of their origins.

I am the only pre-dispersion witness, thus the last witness ever. I have survived my destruction. But will I survive the story that will take my place? I do not think so.

**Robert Margolis**