

Razing Babel: Two Sonnets for Too Xenophobic Times

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In these Xenophobic times, we should recognize that Razing Babel was a blessing not a curse. The punishment of imprisonment within a single, narrow tongue proves much, much worse than the inconvenience of dealing with others who don't speak our native language. Here's why:

We understand ourselves and the world through our language. Thus, we can't understand how we wrestle with anything (including ourselves) if we can't understand our language, too. To have a good understanding of our language (like anything else) we must be able to step outside it and view it from the outside, too. For example, we can't have a good understanding of our house if we can't step outside to survey how it's built and how it's holding up. This applies no less to the language in which we live. Other languages let us step outside our own language house—I learned much more about English by studying French than I ever learned by studying English alone.

Beyond that pretty obvious point, experience has countless facets and we need the freedom of different tongues to capture as many facets as we can. If our language lacks useful words, phrases, or other ways of speaking, we need to pluck these things from other languages as and where we can find them. (And if our sublanguages are similarly lacking, we need to pluck from other sublanguages. For example, if some conservative English speakers lack sensible terms for the transgendered, they need to pluck such terms from richer sublanguages of English that more accurately reflect the world.)

And then, of course, there is the aesthetics of it all. I love English but I couldn't imagine a world without the beauty of French or of the different chords of other languages I've encountered (and no doubt, too, of those I've yet to hear).

Since language is *our* tool and not the reverse, such blessings in diversity of words *a fortiori* apply to diversity in us. (Allow me the Latin here for its beauty and precision as well.) That beauty in our own diversity is also part of the lesson of Razing Babel.

Since the need and beauty of all such diversity is sadly lost on many today, I'll take diversity even further here and speak in sonnets of diverse, competing form (4/4/3/3 vs. 4/4/4/2). Verse in lieu of prose (and prose in lieu of verse) and fun with puns in both further underscore the glory of Babel's fall.

Razing Babel I

Before the tower, we were garroted
By one chord twisted fast around our necks
That kept us on its single cord until
God's razor cut the not. We raise new sounds,

Explore new knowledge, claim new liberties
We hear in novel syllables that, too,
Improve our poetry through vaster stocks
Of words and rhymes than ever heard before.

Translation tunes new sounds and teaches, too,
Not merely of things said but of ourselves
Now singable in sounds unknown before

As languages compete in novel sports
Of wrestling one another for the pen
That none should hoard lest Babel rise again.

Razing Babel II

In simpler times a single tongue served as
A single handle on a broader world,
A single inventory of the means
To praise a multifaceted Divine.

In simpler times a single king sat throned,
A single hunter wearing Adam's skins
That claimed one sovereignty unchallenged of
Both man and beast without conflict of laws.

In simpler times a single way rose up
Unto the Heavens, a single tower men
Devised with one geometry and built
With proper symmetry of form until

God's thunderbolts, O Nimrods now and then,
Roared God will have diversity in men.