

BABEL

But Babel's tower,
that aspiring Art,
composed by craftsmen
calling out
in unison
with flawless speech
the same syntax
that God pronounced
to hyphenate
the Word and world
and Adam spoke
to name the beasts
(when perfect
sense conjoined
the word and thought,
the word and truth,
when just to state
the word was thus
to see it so) —
that spire, devised
with diction so
divine it spiraled
loftily toward Heaven,
fell.

10

20

כל אִשָּׁר יִקְרָא-לוֹ הָאָדָם נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה, הוּא שְׁמוֹ

... brosnað enta geweorc
Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras . . .

Der Mauern hohe Pracht . . .
Die hieß ein Augenblick
in einem Klumpen liegen . . .

Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,
voci alte e fioche . . .
facevano un tumulto . . .

... così è a lui ciascun linguaggio
come 'l suo ad altrui, ch'a nullo è noto.

Confondons leur parole, et faisons que le père
Soit barbare à son fils . . .

Confounded on the plain,
amazed, weaving through
those broken blocks,
we earthbound beings
lost those words
of truth and grace —
so speak in tongues.
As sounding brass
as muffled howling
on the wind one hears
the cryptic counterpoint
and labors to construe
the tortured tones,
to deconstruct
the secret sense
and riddle of
the other.

30

40

And fallen far
we know no words
to answer God
—if he should speak—

(though when we hearken
here below
high Heaven's
signals sound
like silence).

50

*O Mensch! Dies ist ein Fluch,
der nach dem Himmel schmeckt . . .*

כלע . . . פלג לשונם

What jealous god
despised our Art?
Exiled us
in pain and ruin,
scattered forth
our shattered parts?
What god-sized
misinterpretation
made him read
that soaring vault
as an assault on Heaven?

60

*ἀπλῶ λόγῳ τοὺς πάντας ἐχθαίρω θεοῦς,
ὅσοι παθόντες εὖ κακοῦσι μ' ἐκδίκως.*

*Das ist's ja, was den Menschen zieret,
Und dazu ward ihm der verstand,
Daß er im innern Herzen spüret,
Was er erschafft mit seiner Hand.*

(Men simply came
to gain a Name
to bond our blood
and keep us One.)
What punishment—
to quench man's bright
imagination
(given by God
at man's creation)
to crush his instinct
to invent, to mount
Parnassus' peak,
ascend and seek
a higher place.

70

Was God so petty,
vain, and small
a modest arch
could seem a threat?

Or did our best,
most haughty Art
fall short—
like Cain's spurned sweat:
inadequate?

80

*Es spricht der Herren Herr:
Du sollst mich besser ehren!*

Then why did God
grant words at all?

	With cursed, imperfect craft perplexed, we'll cobble yet a steep, sublime,	90
<i>Et extolle illos usque in aeternum . . .</i>	unwobbling tower: we'll brace and prop, heave up a more exalted Art	
<i>non confundar in aeternum.</i>	He can't abhor — we'll pound and pummel at the Gate of God. Then when we've wrestled with the Hosts of Heaven	
	and wrenched it home we'll taste again	100
<i>Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold, . . .</i>	with tongues of flame that language parsed in Paradise,	
<i>And heaven, as at some festival</i>	where grace perfects interpretation: all meanings mated, conjugated,	
<i>Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall.</i>	each to each we are translated.	

— Cori Martin

NOTES to BABEL

Line 15: And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.
(*Genesis 2:19*)

Line 24: . . . the work of giants fell.
Roof-trees snapped, the towers ruined.
(*Ruin*, anon.)

Line 26: The lofty splendor of the walls . . .
One moment made them all lie in a shapeless heap.
(*The Collapse of St. Elizabeth's Church*, Christian Hofmann von Hofmannswaldau)

Line 35: Strange tongues, horrible language,
words of pain, tones of anger,
voices loud and hoarse . . .
make a tumult . . .
(*Inferno III.25-30*, Dante Alighieri)

Line 40: . . . every language is to him
as his is to others, which is known to none.
(*Ibid. XXXI.77-78*)

Line 43: Confound their speech, and make the father
a foreigner to his son . . .
(*La Tour Babel*, Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas)

Line 54: O Man, this is a curse that tastes of Heaven . . .
(von Hofmannswaldau)

Line 59: Destroy their plans . . . confuse their tongues.
(*Psalms 55:9*)

Line 66: In a word, every god I hate
that injures me who never injured him.
(*Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus)

Line 70: What makes a human being is just this,
that he can feel in his inmost heart what he fashions with his hands,
and that is what his wits were given him for.
(*Das Lied von der Glocke*, Friedrich von Schiller)

Line 84: The Lord of Lords speaks:
You must worship me better!
(von Hofmannswaldau)

Line 93: And lift them up forever . . .

Line 95: Let me never be confounded.
(*Te Deum laudamus*)

Line 102: (*On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, John Milton)