Language as the Hero of Our Time: 
Empathy & Estrangement in the Linguistic Century

_Thou hast’ taught me language and my profit on’t is that I know how to curse._

— Caliban in Shakespeare’s _Tempest_ (1610)

In December 1999, on the eve of the new millennium, two professors whose greatest academic achievements occurred under Soviet rule at the Soviet Estonian University of Tartu, Yuri Lotman and Paul Ariste, came in first and second respectively in a national poll to determine the greatest Estonian scholar of the twentieth century.¹ Never mind that Lotman was born to Jewish parents in Soviet Leningrad in 1922, never felt comfortable in the Estonian language, taught Russian literature and studied the age and spirit of the Russian national poet, Alexander Pushkin, in Russian, while founding world’s first journal of semiotics (science of signs) at Tartu University in 1964, a universal language of science with which to transcend national origins of any kind. Never mind that Ariste was born into a mixed Lutheran-Russian Orthodox family, identified more strongly with the Orthodox faith, devoted his life to becoming a self-styled cosmopolitan conversant in more than thirty languages and one of the Soviet Union’s two or three leading Esperantists, a universal language with which to transcend national origins of any kind.

Ariste’s very first scholarly effort, published in a Cologne journal in 1921 when he was only sixteen introduced Europe to its smallest nation in the language of Esperanto: “Pri la livoj: La plej malgranda popolo en Europo” [“On the Livonians: The Smallest Nation in Europe”]. On his first trip abroad to Helsinki that same year to the annual Congress of Esperantists he requested the autograph of the widow of Ludwig Zamenhoff, the Bialystok-born Jewish inventor of Esperanto, which he carried on his person until his death.² Ariste also learned Yiddish and sometimes even used it to pretend to be Jewish himself.³ His review in Estonian in 1926 of the Yiddish translation of the Estonian National Epic, _Kalevipoeg_ attracted the attention of the leading Estonian writer-critic, Friedebert Tuglas, who could barely contain his disappointment at their first encounter as Ariste later recalled more than once in his memoirs: “Pity you aren’t Jewish. I was already rejoicing that we were about to get our own Estonian-speaking Jewish intellectual. We don’t have any. Other nations have them. Jews are smart. George Brandes [from Denmark—DILB] is Jewish. Have you read?”⁴

² Paul Ariste, _Mälestusi_ (Tartu: Eesti Kirjanduse Selts, 2008), 97.
³ Ariste, _Mälestusi_, 63
When Yuri Lotman arrived in Tartu in 1950, fleeing Stalin’s “anti-cosmopolitan campaign,” which made it nearly impossible for Jews to find employment in metropolitan Russia, Estonia finally got its own Jewish intellectual, but it wasn’t until 1999, half a decade after his death, that Yuri Lotman finally became at least in the language of one national survey, an Estonian. Both Ariste and Lotman suffered their share of Soviet repression. But what makes their stories so remarkable and significant for the intellectual history of the twentieth century was the spectacular success they enjoyed despite it, first during their lifetime in their Soviet academic careers, as two of the most internationally decorated scholars in Soviet Estonia, and then posthumously after the collapse of the Soviet Union in Estonian national memory. This success had a lot to do with Ariste’s and Lotman’s capacity to speak two scholarly languages—the language of national empathy and the language of cosmopolitan estrangement—even as they learned to live between two literal ones (Estonian and Russian) in the bilingual establishment of Tartu State University.

It was not by chance that both Lotman and Ariste were professors of language and literature, who occupied precarious if esteemed positions as the chairs of their respective departments, Russian Literature and Finno-Ugric Studies. There is something peculiar and unprecedented about the unintended fascination with language—both as a means for the self-expression of particular groups and as a universal means of communication among them—at the bilingual Russian- and Estonian-speaking University of Tartu under Soviet rule 1944-1991. For all its ineluctable particularity, I believe their story is a symptom of a more universal story that remains hidden in plain view when universities speak relatively uncontested languages in the service of relatively uncontested states. This is the story of how language became a central preoccupation of so much twentieth century scholarly endeavor and popular thought. The twentieth century looked for truth in language, much as the nineteenth century had looked for truth in history.

If the origins of the nineteenth century’s obsession with history owe something to the quickening pace of historical change and the pursuit of development and democracy in the ongoing Industrial and French Revolutions (neither has a clear end date), the origins of the twentieth century’s obsession with language must be sought in the repeated and unpredictable disruptions of and disappointments with that change—i.e. the discombobulating effect of Two World Wars, and the political and social upheavals they produced, challenging Europe’s global hegemony with political decolonization, economic globalization, and the Cold War. It was a world that no longer trusted the internal subjective expressions of the individual mind nor the external world of empirical, objective “facts.” Both were equally susceptible to the manipulations of advertising or the propaganda state. So it sought refuge in what lay between—language, the narrow pathway that leads from the internal isolation of individual consciousness (where Continental philosophers ever since Descartes had been looking for reality, “I think therefore I am”) to the outward manifestation of being (where British empiricists had placed their bets since John Locke declared the human mind to be a Tabula rasa).

Language was a link from the inner world to the outer one, the individual to the collective, self to society—which had the virtue of being the property of both and neither at the same time. Thus, even language itself was divided. If language had a special place in twentieth-century consciousness, this was a role that cut in two directions at once—toward the particularity
of individual and national expression on the one hand and the universality of global communication on the other: the century that began with the global promise of Esperanto and Saussurean structuralism in the 1920s, ended with Babel on both sides of the Iron Curtain with Yuri Lotman defining the minimum standard for any adequate representation of reality as “two languages” and Jacques Derrida offering a nearly identical definition of his critical method of deconstruction as “plus d’une langue” (more than one language) at almost exactly the same time. But the tension between the two impulses could be felt throughout. The heyday of national languages was equally the heyday of Esperanto. Before settling on Europe’s three most imperial languages (English, French, and Spanish) the League of Nations even briefly considered adopting Esperanto as truly non-hegemonic lingua franca in 1920. Esperanto was only the best known of 912 known metalinguistic projects undertaken since the Fall of Rome and counted by the Soviet Ukrainian Tartu University Professor, Alexander Dulichenko, most conceived in Europe or Eurasia, and nearly two thirds (560) in the 20th century before the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the same period, under the force of national self-determination and decolonization the number of sovereign states in the world nearly quadrupled from a little more than 50 to a little less than 200. In the process, some languages (like Livonian) went extinct, while others (like Hebrew) came back to life. By the end of the century, more than half of the world’s states had a European language as one of their official languages, and more than a quarter conducted their business in English. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian, the fifth most spoken language in the world (directly ahead of Arabic), only remained an official language in five of its fifteen former Republics—Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—a testament to its failed bid for linguistic transparency and universalism. But the Babel of decolonization was always offset by globalizing Pentecost, carried out in both a Communist and Capitalist key: as its restaurants spread around the world, McDonalds began speaking in tongues, its menu translated into Spanish (1967), German (1971), Japanese (1971), French (1972), Finnish (1984), Italian (1985), Hungarian (1988) Russian (1990), Chinese (1990) Hebrew (1993), Arabic (1993) Estonian (1995), Urdu (1998), Georgian (1999), and Azeri (1999).

The binary divide was inherent in language itself—the relationship between particular individual expression and the laws or structures that govern speech. Saussure’s revolutionary invention of modern linguistics on the eve of World War One occupied the universe of the mind with the division of language into a relationship between the deep structures of langue and the surface utterance of parole. The structuralist faith in langue as the metalinguistic key to the underlying order of things gave way in the 1960s to the poststructuralist revenge of particular utterance (parole) with the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” “performativity,” and the conviction that “there is nothing outside the text,” no objective, pre-textual reference point from which any textual analysis might proceed. The non-verbal order of things capitulated to Derridean

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5 See Kontra, Miklós; Phillipson, Robert; Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove; Varady, Tibor. Language, a Right and a Resource: Approaching Linguistic Human Rights (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999).
6 These statistics were compiled in 1989 by a Tartu University professor of Slavic Microlanguages. See Alexander Dulichenko, Mezhdunarodnye iazyki (Tallinn: Valgus, 1990).
deconstructions and Foucauldian genealogies of the politics of the real, as in the *Orientalism* of Edward Said, who refused to make any positive claims about the Near East while decrying its construction in the literature of British and French 19th-century Imperialism. Language became the hero of our time, the author of humanity (rather than the other way around) as Foucault questioned the author and Roland Barthes announced his “death.”8 It turned out that “man had been a figure occurring between two modes of language.”9 A change in those arrangements and “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”10 Or as Jean-François Lyotard put it, linking early twentieth-century crises of self to science, and appealing to Robert Musil’s classic from interwar Vienna, *The Man Without Qualities*: “each of us knows that our self does not amount to much.”11

But this anti-humanist defamiliarization of humanity by language was just one side of the linguistic decolonization of twentieth-century thought. For at the same time earnest post-colonials “gave voice” to silent subalterns and rescued invisible agents from the “enormous condescension of posterity” through “thick description” and participant-observer anthropology.12 Jean-Paul Sartre rejoiced when he discovered Frantz Fanon: “the Third World finds *itself* and speaks to *itself* through his voice.”13 Still, Sartre’s enthusiasm for Fanon seemed to have as much to do with how Fanon defamiliarized Europe as with how he gave voice to the Third World:

1961. Listen: “Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience.” The tone is new. Who dares to speak thus? It is an African, a man from the Third World, an ex-‘native.’14

The defamiliarizing encounter with the other, whether real or imaginary, was to become a common poststructuralist trope. Just as Sartre had savored the Otherness of Fanon’s representation of Europe, Michel Foucault savored the literary otherness of a Chinese Emperor’s classificational scheme. He loved its capacity—never mind that it was plucked from a fictional story conceived in a yet another post-colonial periphery (Argentina)—to make us realize “by the exotic charm of another system of thought, … the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.” In fact, Foucault claimed that his entire Archaeology of the Human Sciences “arose out of [this one] passage in Borges.”15 In a similar vein, Julia Kristeva savored her personal encounter with the “otherness” of a Chinese village in *Des Chinoises* (1974), where Kristeva (and her tour group, including Roland Barthes) had been the first foreigners these

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8 See Foucault “What is an author” and Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author.”
10 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 425.
13 Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 10.
14 Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, 9.
15 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxiii.
villagers had ever seen. This passage is quoted, translated into Russian and with a certain degree of irony, by Boris Gasparov in his essay, “In Search of the Other.” Kristeva wrote of her experience there: “I don't feel myself to be a foreigner as in Baghdad or New York. I feel myself to be a monkey, a Martian—the other.” The unique linguistic spirit of twentieth-century life and thought can be found in the encounter of two ways of knowing—by means of particularist empathy of the periphery and universalist estrangement of the center—and their encounter in the academic culture of the universities of the twentieth century.¹⁷

1. The Particularist Periphery and Its Language of Empathy

The voice of the periphery had its eighteenth-century Bildung in the embattled, self-doubting, particularism of biblical hermeneutics and small-town German Romanticism. French after-all had been the language of the 18th-century German aristocracy.¹⁸ Setting the value of cultural freedom above political power, it sought to save the particularizing human sciences from the arrogant law-bound universalism of the natural ones.¹⁹ German national consciousness, like the national consciousness of most nations east of the Rhine in Europe or in Third World in the twentieth century (where elites spoke a different language from commoners), arose out of a sense of inferiority, division, and oppression. Nationals came to seek in the unique and authentic depths of their “culture” and “national soul”—always juxtaposed to the more superficial attainments of Imperial French or Roman “Civilization”—a “special path,” Sonderweg in German, an Osobyi put’ in Russian, terms that have broader and deeper cultural resonance than more limited historiographical debates care to consider. Johann Gottfried von Herder set the empathetic tone, claiming that in order to understand the ancient Scottish poet Ossian one “must become a rough Scotsman and see the incidents of his life through his eyes, feel with his heart, think with his imagination.” For Herder and Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer—all figures who owed a


¹⁷ Though often geographical, here it should be specified that center and periphery are used metaphorically (as they are in most contemporary discourse) less to mean a geographical position on the globe, though quite often they correspond to this, as a position in relation to power.

¹⁸ See Norbert Elias’s The Civilizing Process for an interesting historical exegesis of the sociogenesis of French Civilization and German Culture as the basis for French and German nationalism respectively.

¹⁹ For a particularly concise and cogent late-19th-century German expression of this opposition see Wilhelm Windelband (1848, Potsdam—1915, Heidelberg). Windelband sought to establish the essential differences between the human and natural sciences. For Windelband (1) nomothetic and (2) idiographic approaches differed in that one sought to make knowledge by finding “rules” or propositional laws (nomethesis) to explain the phenomena of the world in an objective way, while the other relied on descriptive specifications to understand in a subjective way. The former is often seen as appropriate for studies of classes and groups (the individual subsumed within a larger totality), the latter for examining the behavior of the individual investigated upon its own terms.

personal and intellectual debt to small-town German Universities—knowledge was born of experience, of subjective identification and empathetic understanding.\textsuperscript{21} From Herder’s \textit{Einfühlung} (empathy) to Dilthey’s \textit{Verstehen} (understanding), to Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” knowing was a matter of learning to see with the eyes and speak with the tongue of another. And insofar as “language [was] the house of being” as Heidegger declared it to be, knowing meant turning the other’s house into a home, not collapsing it into oneself, but expanding oneself to match the linguistic vision of the other’s consciousness. This is precisely what the small-town Basel historian, Jacob Burckhardt, recommended in the final sentences of his \textit{Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy}: “The soul of man can by recognizing God draw Him into its narrow boundaries, but also by love to Him itself expand into the Infinite—and this is blessedness on earth.”\textsuperscript{22}

If this vision had global purchase in the new world order of the aftermath of the Second World War this was because of the high premium placed upon the \textit{expressive} language of the embattled periphery, the colonized other, reasserting its self and authenticity against an indifferent metropolitan center and state, which had subsumed its difference to an allegedly universal standard of truth and progress. As Frantz Fanon put it in 1961, “Challenging the colonial world … is not a discourse on the universal, but the impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different.”\textsuperscript{23} But in order to be heard, Fanon had to become fluent in the “universal” language of the metropole—the scientific language of psychiatry, of trauma, of European philosophy and revolution—a language to which he had been initiated at an elite preparatory school in Martinique by his Europeanized teacher, Aimé Césaire, but carried to fluency through his studies in Lyon. It was a mastery that rendered him comprehensible and interesting to Jean-Paul Sartre, who then wrote of Fanon as the authentic voice of the Third World.

The same relationship between the language of the center and periphery, of the universal and the particular, might be found in the language of Mahatma Gandhi, whose journey to agrarian Indian traditionalism happened by way of law school at University College London, and the discovery of his Indian national identity in South Africa. His Western education rendered

\textsuperscript{21} There were other voices here too, and other ways of constructing this genealogy. For many intellectual historians, the Enlightenment is the touchstone by which.… John Zammito writes that “Frederick Beiser, for example, has argued that the line from Hume to Friedrich Nietzsche has proved far more influential for modernism and especially postmodernism than the Kantian enterprise of a transcendental grounding of reason. Beiser traces this line from Berlin’s ‘counter enlightenment’ via the Jena Romantics, the later Friedrich Schelling and Sören Kierkegaard. That may render the history of modern thought in too starkly an anti-Enlightenment light. But there is an alternative tradition, one not so hostile to the Enlightenment, that would carry forward from Herder to Wilhelm von Humboldt and G.W.F. Hegel, to Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Wolf, to the left Hegelians, to Leopold von Ranke, Johann Droysen and Wilhelm Dilthey: the tradition of hermeneutics and historicism. I believe that tradition deserves to be regarded as part of the ‘unfinished project of the Enlightenment,’ not lumped among its adversaries. But that would entail seeing the Enlightenment as more than just eh Kantian critical philosophy, or at least it urges us to reconsider the eighteenth century without orthodox Kantian lenses.” John Zammito, \textit{Kant, Herder, and The Birth of Anthropology} (2002), 7 and 8.


\textsuperscript{23} Frantz Fanon, “On Violence” in \textit{The Wretched of the Earth}, 6.
him the simple voice of the huddled masses of the periphery, perfectly poised to mock the self-satisfied universalism of the West: Western Civilization? “It would be a good idea.” This apocryphal quotation sounded better, of course, after Gandhi had cast off the smart suit with which he defended his wealthy Muslim clients as a lawyer in South Africa, and donned the simple homespun Indian cloth of the Khadi movement.

Whether imagined violently (as in Fanon) or peacefully (as in Gandhi) the challenge of the periphery to the center in the throes of decolonization was essentially a Herderian position. Herder had theorized the value of the authentic native voice and language, as he gathered the folksongs of the last Christians in Hartmann Schedel’s 1493 World Chronicle (Weltchronik)—the Estonians, Livs, and Latvians, from his post as a young Lutheran pastor in Riga in the 1760s. One can only wonder if they—or anyone else for that matter—would ever have come to see the value of their music and folksongs, let alone organize national song festivals to celebrate it, if someone more cosmopolitan than they had not yearned for its authenticity in the first place.

The Estonian national epic was published in German translation together with the Estonian “original” between 1857 and 1861. The relationship of Estonian students to their Baltic German teachers at the imperial university of Tartu was foreshadowed by Herder’s own vexed relationship to his teacher in the Prussian capital of Königsberg, Immanuel Kant. John Zammito has described Herder’s wide-eyed arrival in the Prussian capital itself as an encounter between the cosmopolitan core and provincial periphery:

Johan Gottfried Herder arrived in Königsberg in May 1762, a seventeen-year-old, small town boy, sensitive and reticent, for whom the city initially appeared overwhelming…. Kant’s praise for “Königsberg’s cosmopolitanism” was for the benefit of “his students, most of them young men from the hinterlands of Königsberg, for whom this was in all likelihood the best and for some the only vantage on the wider world they could expect.”

In a reconstruction of the relationship between Kant and Herder, based largely on letters and Herder’s lecture notes, Zammito traces the divergence of their thought in the 1760s and 70s. On the one side it culminated in Kant’s “critical turn” and three philosophical critiques—of Pure Reason, Practical Reason, and Judgment (1781–1790), on the other, in Herder’s anthropological turn expressed in the four volumes of Ideas for a Philosophical History of Man (1784–91). The thought of each was shaped by his encounter with the other, and pursuit of an enlightened answer to a common question: “what is a human being?” Critical of Kant’s hasty flight to universals,

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25 Originally published as *Folksongs* in 1778–9 and then a quarter of a century later as *Voices of Nations in Songs (Stimmen der Völker in Liedern)*.
27 In a wonderful “contextual history” of Johann Gottfried von Herder’s lecture notes from the classes of Immanuel Kant between 1762 and 1764, John Zammito reconstructs how this relationship informs our knowledge of the “calving” of Anthropology from Philosophy: “What I propose is an effort…. to trace the emergence of the differences between Herder and Kant, articulating the rift as it widened gradually over the last years of the 1760s and the first years of the 1770s…. I am concerned with Herder’s ‘reception’ of Kant as much as with Kant’s ‘influence.’” John Zammito, *Kant, Herder*, 350.
Herder plunged into particular authors and multiple genres, seeking to compile a “map of the human soul.”

The patronizing tone of some of Kant’s letters to his bright charge cannot have helped to build common ground between them. Cautioning Herder against an overabundance of emotion (the center is always telling the periphery to calm down and be reasonable), Kant wrote to Herder:

I look forward with much satisfaction to that time when the fruitful spirit is no longer so driven by the warm impulses of youthful feelings and achieves that tranquility which is gentle and yet full of feeling and at the same time is the contemplative life of the philosopher, the very opposite of the one that mystics dream of.

When Herder responded to this letter after a brooding, six-month silence in November 1768, he foreshadowed the arguments Fanon and Gandhi put to Western Civilization in the twentieth century, by turning his teacher’s words against him, exposing the performative contradiction between Kant’s example and statements: “Why shouldn’t I apply the little bit of philosophy I possess to the fashionable materials of our quarter century, if the application of a sound philosophy, as I flatter myself, can correct so many things?” But the world-historical triumph of Herder over Kant—of the periphery over the center, the university student over the university teacher, of the particularism of anthropology over the universalism of philosophy—may be that today the “most interesting current reception [of Kant] seeks to reinterpret Kant’s entire opus in anthropological terms.” In other words, the lens and object of study have switched places. In his own day, Herder had to answer to Kant, and Kant’s “critical philosophy as the systematic articulation of the experience of freedom” determined the reception Herder’s “science of man.” Today, it is just the reverse. Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” (1784) and faith in the possibility of a universal, transparent, unproblematic language in which to express it is challenged by Herder’s vision of a multiplicity of particular languages as the only meaningful kind of cosmopolitanism, a twenty-two year-old pastor in Riga: “How little progress would we have made, were each nation to strive for learnedness by itself, confined within the narrow sphere of its language?”

2. The Universalist Center and Its Language of Estrangement

The need for a new universal language was not entirely clear to René Descartes. “We do not need to learn a new language to talk only to Frenchmen” he mused in 1629 in a letter to abbé Mersenne, when asked to comment upon a recent project for a more perfect, universal

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28 Zammito, Kant, Herder, 314.
29 Kant to Herder, May 9, 1768 as quoted in Zammito, Kant, Herder, 312.
30 Herder to Kant November 1768 as quoted in Zammito, Kant, Herder, 312.
31 Zammito, Kant, Herder, 351.
language. In fact, his famous phrase “Cogito, ergo sum,” like the rest of his 1637 **Discourse on Method** was originally written in French to reach a wider audience—a sign of the changing linguistic character of Europe—only to be translated into Latin as an afterthought. With France as the universal nation, the civilization process has long been about turning peasants into Frenchmen. And the whole world was full of potential Frenchmen. Only from the perspective of a language with the hubris to imagine itself as universal is it possible to speak of “language as such.” This idea was taken up by Descartes, compiled into a Grammar and methodology by the Porte Royale Grammarians, and then reimagined by Noam Chomsky as a predecessor to his own most controversial and least successful work: **Cartesian Linguistics**. With his Cartesian Coordinate system, Descartes cast a mathematical grid across the world, an image given resonant expression—the metaphor applied just as easily to the English language at the height of the British Empire as to French—in E.M. Forester’s *Passage to India*: “The roads, named after victorious generals and intersecting at right angles, were symbolic of the net Great Britain had thrown over India. [Aziz] felt caught in their meshes.”

In the absence of a perfect mathematical or artificial language to do the task—of the kind imagined by Descartes and other francophone Europeans, including Leibniz, Condillac, d’Alembert, and Condorcet—the European center, ever since the seventeenth-century decline of Latin as the universal language of scholarship, faith, and diplomacy—spoke increasingly in the self-confident, universal language of French-civilization and its metropolitan capital. Many echoed Walter Benjamin in calling Paris the “Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” More recent scholars have gone further. David Harvey has called Paris the “Capital of Modernity” and Patrice Higonnet, “Capital of the World.” From the eighteenth-century to the Second World War, according to Higonnet, Paris had also been the “capital of the modern self” with its “blend of meliorism, rationality, individualism, and scientism.” Paris needed no justification outside itself; it seemed to offer a view from nowhere, exceeding any personal experience of Paris. Perhaps the most universal European man of letters at the turn of the nineteenth century and author of the idea of “World Literature,” Johann Wolfgang von “Goethe—though he never visited Paris—called it the universal city.” Paris had no need for the concept of “authenticity.” Authenticity mattered to excluded peripherals like Rousseau or Herder. For them Paris was a city of veils, dissembling, artifice, and inauthentic self-reinvention.

But the global colonization of the human sciences by its metropolitan language was largely a twentieth-century phenomenon at a peculiar historical conjuncture. Impressed into the service of the Third Reich in the Second World War, and faced with the loss of its colonies in the decades thereafter, Paris turned back against its humiliated and defamiliarized self in the postwar era (as it had in a more limited way after the Russian occupation of 1814). For the new antihumanist cosmopolitans born in the first third of the twentieth century, educated and

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35 For a late twentieth-century French take on these two epistemological directions see Jean François Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard’s interpretation of the reigning epistemological tension of the twentieth century essentially boils down to two national metanarratives: the French narrative of liberation and the German narrative of the integration of all knowledge, symbolized above all by the University of Berlin.
estranged in Paris—Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Baudrillard—all knowledge was born of estrangement, of Saussure’s recognition of the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified. Even those who explicitly rejected this way of seeing the world—like Pierre Bourdieu—nonetheless formulated their positions in explicit opposition to it, crediting first Saussure and then Chomsky with provoking a revolution in his own field of sociology. Knowledge was the dispassionate translation of the terms of one’s own language into those of an unfamiliar and foreign tongue, overcoming or escaping oneself and one’s home, indeed the limits of all homes and subjectivities.

In Tristes Tropiques and The Savage Mind Lévi-Strauss did less to domesticate the image of the colonized other than to defamiliarize the portrait of the metropolitan self, a process that was only radicalized by the poststructuralists who challenged and questioned him. All knowledge (and its power) had become relational, to be sought and found in the communicative act itself, in the moment of homeless encounter between the imperial center and its colonized periphery, rather than in the naively earnest expressions of the native tongue. In this estranged, cosmopolitan vision of the world, “home” was neither possible nor desirable. If Heidegger’s language was the native’s “house of being,” then Derrida’s language was a halfway house for the estranged colonial exile, an Algerian-born, Paris-educated, Jewish-Frenchman on a path of “traces,” “erasure,” and “différance” to an infinitely deferred and indeterminate destination. His life in Algiers and the anti-semitic colonial policy of the Vichy regime gave him “a lifelong aversion to communities” and a “deep suspicion of solidarity” of any kind.

Defamiliarization, after all, was what Derrida stated as the ultimate aim of his Grammatology: “To make enigmatic what one think one understands by the words “proximity,” “immediacy,” “presence” (the proximate [proche], the own [propre], and the pre- of presence), is my final intention in this book.” Derrida’s simplest definition of Deconstruction seems to grasp this direction in twentieth-century thought, celebrating irreducible multiplicity and polyphony for its own sake: “If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical, and economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: plus d’une langue—more than one language, no more of one language.”

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38 Though he acknowledged the debt of 20th-century sociology to Saussure and Chomsky, ultimately Bourdieu was more concerned with the specious objectivity of structural linguistics: “Given that it sprang from the autonomy attributed to language in relation to its social conditions of production, reproduction and use, structural linguistics could not become the dominant social science without exercising an ideological effect, by bestowing the appearance of scientificity on the naturalization of the products of history, that is, on symbolic objects.” Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 33.

39 “At the age of 12, Derrida was excluded from his lycee when the Algerian government, anxious to outdo the Vichy regime in its anti-semitic zeal, decided to lower the quota of Jewish pupils. … Paradoxically, the effect of this brutal rejection on a ‘little black and very Arab Jew’ as he described himself, was not only to make him feel an outsider, but to breed in him a lifelong aversion to communities. He was taken in by a Jewish school, and hated the idea of being defined by his Jewish identity. Identity and homogeneity were what he would later seek to deconstruct. Yet the experience also gave him a deep suspicion of solidarity.” Terry Eagleton, “Derrida: A Biography by Benoît Peeters,” The Guardian, November 12, 2012; “I took part in the extraordinary transformation of the Algerian Jews; my great-grandparents were by language, custom, etc., still identified with Arabic culture. After the Cremieux Decree (1870), at the end of the 19th c., the following generation became bourgeois.” Jacques Derrida, “Je suis en guerre contre moi, Le Monde, August 19, 2004.

40 Jacques Derrida, Grammatology, 70.

the position (and linguistic identity) of the speaker, as Derrida expressed in his essay on the Tower of Babel: “One should never pass over in silence the question of the tongue in which the question of the tongue is raised and into which a discourse on translation is translated.”

Better than anywhere else, perhaps, the tension within twentieth-century linguistic consciousness emerges in the common concerns of Heidegger and Derrida. But in their shared suspicion of the last two thousand years of European thought, their common suspicion of “intelligibility” (which explains in part the studied difficulty of their prose), similar vocabulary (“Destruktion” and “deconstruction”), and seemingly identical concern with “the metaphysics of presence,” something is lost in translation. In The Truth (and Untruth) of Language, Gert-Jan van der Heiden sets the linguistic dimensions of their philosophy in comparative perspective. Where Heidegger’s backward-looking language “disclosed” deep and hidden, long-forgotten truths and elevated the authentic immediacy of the spoken word of poetry (like Herder or Rousseau) above philosophy to a position of “sacred” importance, Derrida’s forward-looking language—a written rather than oral one to be examined by means of “grammatology”—“displaced” meanings through infinite translations in a world where all existence is relational, where the idea of truth itself is naive. In performative practice, Derrida’s critique—like différence itself—amounted to the eternal deferral of the question that launched Heidegger’s career in 1927 and in which he had made his intellectual home ever since—i.e. the question of what it means to “be.”

Like many of the leading French intellectuals of his generation, Derrida got his academic degree in Paris at the post-Revolutionary Napoleonic institution for the cultivation of a new French intelligentsia, the École Normale Supérieure. He took several different positions at institutions of higher learning in Paris and elsewhere, alighting finally in 1987 as “Professor of the Humanities” for one semester a year upon the brutalist, concentric rings of UC Irvine. Designed and built in the 1960s, UC Irvine was a university of the present, without a past, colonizing empty space in the middle of nowhere (perfect for postmodern reflections on “deterritorialization”), near a highway overpass on the outskirts of America’s most sprawling metropolis in the Wild West. It was the very antithesis of Heidegger’s Freiburg, an old small-town university founded in 1457, where Heidegger spent almost the entirety of his academic career (interspersed with a brief interlude in Marburg) from his student days in the Second Reich to his retirement after the Second World War in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Derrida, by contrast, spent almost the entirety of his academic career en route to somewhere else. Deprived of any content, the new “University of Excellence” had become a school for the cultivation of exchange and instrumental reason in a referentless market economy, ever since the abolition of the Dollar-Gold standard and the postwar economic arrangements reached in 1944 at Bretton Woods turned the global economy into virtual reality in 1971. As Bill Readings argued in The University in Ruins, explicitly using UC Irvine as an example, “What

42 Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel” 244-5.
44 In this sense, if none other, Derrida seems to approximate Isaiah Berlin’s “fox” (who sees many things), and Heidegger, his “hedgehog” (who sees only one big thing).
gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched.”

By not fitting in anywhere at all, Derrida fit right in to the University of Irvine.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari lamented this new, homeless, virtual language and university of the postmodern predicament, where all knowledge had been reduced to communication (however transparent or opaque), language games promoting a never-ending dialogical exchange of ideas:

We do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation. *We lack resistance to the present.* The creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist. Europeanization does not constitute a becoming but merely the history of capitalism, which prevents the becoming of subjected peoples.

The appeal to “a new earth and people,” to liberation from the prevailing European order of things, to salvation in the “becoming of subjected peoples” rings out here like an echo of old-fashioned German or Russian romanticism—and its call for the sacred (now located in the periphery)—at the heart of this French poststructuralist text. After estrangement, however, it seemed there was nowhere else for the poststructuralists to go but the old universalist millenarian promise of a new humanity, no longer redeemed by the homeless proletariat (who “has no native land”) but this time by the uprooted and exiled “subjected peoples” of the Third World, resisting “Europeanization.”

Others, like Heidegger, tried to go back, to find their point of origin, to recover a simpler home at the very heart of the old Europe. Heidegger withdrew in 1947 to the mountain cabin at Tottnauberg overlooking the Black Forest outside Freiburg, where he had composed most of *Being in Time.* Now he wrote “The Pathway,” his ode to primordial simplicity born of memories of his childhood home in nearby Messkirch, an attempt—in the spirit of his teacher’s (Edmund Husserl’s) phenomenology—to save the integrity of thought by embedding it in sensory experience, with an almost studied omission of possessive pronouns: “The pathway remains as close to the step of the thinker as to that of the farmer walking out to the mowing in early morning.” He wrote of the memory of “the father” (not *my* father) who “labored, thoughtful when pausing from his efforts at the sound of tower clock and bells—both maintaining their own relationship to time and temporality.”

Heidegger claimed that the language of the modern world had silenced an older and nearly silent language:

In vain does man try with his plans to bring his globe into order if he is not ordered to the message of the pathway. The danger looms that today’s men are hard of hearing towards its language. They have ears only for the noise of media, which they consider to be almost the voice of God. So man becomes distracted and pathless. To the distracted the

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Simple seems monotonous…. With the last stroke the stillness becomes yet more still. It reaches out even to those who have been sacrificed before time in two world wars. The Simple has become simpler….. The message of the pathway is now quite clear. Is the soul speaking? Is the world speaking? Is God speaking?”

In silence, Heidegger claimed to find the answer: “The message makes us be at home in a long Origin.” (Der Zuspruch macht heimsich in einer langen Herkunft). But home could scarcely be what it had been before the War for a man who was undergoing scrutiny at the time for his political compromise. Heidegger had lost his professorship in Freiburg after the War, and his fate remained in limbo while he was investigated for what he had done when appointed Rector of his hometown University of Freiburg by Hitler in the Third Reich.

Postwar Europe was full of displaced persons, of refugees turned colonists. “The colonist is always a foreigner,” declared Fanon. Presumably he remained a foreigner—and a colonist—even when he tried to reclaim his ancestral home. This was as true of postwar European thought as its populations. Some rejected the past and tried to turn their newfound “displacement” into a way of life and thought (like Derrida); but even those who tried to return home—from Concentration camps, from the Gulag, from foreign exile, from the shame and judgment of deeds done in the name of past commitments (like Heidegger), or from the resentments of forgotten injustice to homes lost in their own lifetime or in some mythical past (each to his own Jerusalem)—found that there too they had been rendered strange, colonists in someone else’s land.

3. The Postwar University and Its Languages of Empathy and Estrangement

The University has always been both a meeting place for particular languages and a laboratory for the making (or recovery) of a more universal one. In the twentieth century the struggle between the centripetal impulse toward the integration of all knowledge into a universal metalanguage of science and the centrifugal tendency toward a particularistic linguistic division of labor became especially acute and threatened both the university and the nation-state with irrelevance. In The Postmodern Condition (1978), a work commissioned by the universities of Quebec, Jean François Lyotard predicted the disappearance of the university: “this very postmodern moment […] finds the University nearing what may be its end, while the Institute may just be beginning”). In The University in Ruins (1994), another book commissioned by the universities of Quebec, Bill Readings anticipated the disappearance of the nation-state as well:

51 Frantz Fanon, “On Violence” in The Wretched of the Earth, 5.
52 It is often forgotten that the original essay was commissioned by the Conseil supérieur de l’éducation of Québec as a consulting piece for its universities. See Jean François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxv
The so-called center, the nation-state, is now merely a virtual point that organizes peripheral subjectivities within the global flow of capital; it is not a site to be occupied. Everyone seems to be culturally excluded, while at the same time almost everyone is included within the global flow of capital. As academics know very well, the position of enunciation is peripheral: the center is silent. By this I mean that in order to speak in today’s academy one is constrained to assume a position of marginality. So even conservatives have to tell the story of their own marginalization from culture in order to speak for themselves.

With the decline of the university and the nation-state, what remained was language speaking itself as “discourse.” Indeed, after the Second World War with decolonization and globalization, nearly every discipline in the humanities and social sciences underwent a “linguistic turn,” capitalizing on hitherto specialized studies of language—from linguistic structuralism to British analytic philosophy to Chomsky’s Generative Grammar. These became models for universal knowledge in disciplines across the entire spectrum of the human and social sciences and beyond. Thus, in a peculiar and unprecedented way, the second half of the twentieth century turned all knowledge into language.

Even the historiography of the French Revolution faced linguistic decolonization after the Second World War. Gone was the easy Marxist synthesis of the Popular Front, given voice by Georges LeFebvre’s 1939 “history from below,” the Coming of the French Revolution. Lefebvre had represented the French nation as an integration of its proletarian, peasant, bourgeois, and aristocratic elements. Each had contributed something to the Revolution and therefore to modern France; each had its place in the national pantheon. After the War, the colonial periphery struck back at the self-satisfied center. The new occupant of the Chair of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne from 1967, the Algerian-born communist Albert Soboul, initiated a Leninist purge of the historiographical ranks of LeFebvre’s Revolution, celebrating the “Popular masses and Militant Sans-Culottes” at the expense of everyone else as the vanguard of revolutionary consciousness (and language), turning LeFebvre’s revolutionary allies into enemies of the people. Faced with this challenge from the periphery, the center responded as François Furet carried the French Revolution towards a new linguistic synthesis—purging Marx, rehabilitating Tocqueville—and initiating a “linguistic turn” with his discursive analysis of French Revolutionary politics: what mattered to Furet was not the people as such, but the linguistic construction of the people, the people who had been discursively produced by the Revolution, to fill the disembodied void that is popular sovereignty. With self-conscious irony, French television crowned Furet “King of the Bicentennial” in 1989.

An expatriate from a different Europe an periphery darkened Furet’s already somber vision of the Revolution. The francophone Pole, Bronislaw Basczko, began Ending the Terror with the 1794 Parisian rumor of Robespierre’s hidden royalism, ended with the myth of the eternal Revolution, and entirely avoided the return of the non-linguistic “real world” that Furet had at least projected forward into the Thermidorean reaction. The metamorphosis was complete. Even the most resonant founding

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53 Readings, The University in Ruins, 111.
moment of Europe’s metropolitan modernity—and its promises of liberty, equality, and fraternity—had turned into a linguistic function, its political power, meaning, possibilities, and pathologies all to be found and diagnosed in language.

As nearly every discipline in the humanities and social sciences underwent a “linguistic turn” in the new world order of the second half of the twentieth century—with its dual impulse to domesticate the foreign with the “authenticity” of the singular decolonized voice of the nation on the one hand and estrange the familiar with relativity of a multiplicity of voices—language even threatened the positivism of political economy.\(^56\) In 1982, Austrian-born John Gerard Ruggie, Harvard’s future Berthold Beitz Professor in Human Rights and International Affairs and an important figure in the United Nations, posed the central question of his classic essay on the economic and geopolitical regimes of the postwar world as a problem of language: “What is the ‘generative grammar’ that shapes the internationalization of political authority?”\(^57\) Ruggie went on to argue that the logic of state-economic relations must be sought in language: “international regimes are akin to language—we may think of them as the language of state action.”\(^58\) If the language of free trade was the prevailing economic regime of the late nineteenth century, and de-globalized protectionism the language of the interwar period, then “embedded liberalism” (in which the free-market was tempered by concerns for domestic welfare) was the language that ruled the global world order until the United States unilaterally decided to abandon the Gold Standard in 1971, turning global economics into a virtual reality akin to language.\(^59\)

Ruggie’s linguistic vision of shifts within the regimes of global political economy bore more than a passing resemblance to the “paradigm shifts” by which Thomas Kuhn—relying on the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein—explained the “structure of scientific revolutions” or the linguistic “epistemes” by which Michel Foucault explained the “the order of things” more generally.\(^60\) For all three, knowledge was modeled by language. Kuhn said so explicitly: “Scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all.”\(^61\) Moreover, for all three, a linguistic perspective upon the world led them to see their diverse fields in nearly identical terms, marked by long periods of stasis or equilibrium (as in a language) unpredictably interrupted by periods of sudden change.

But it was not just scientific knowledge but the natural world itself that had turned into language when Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould challenged prevailing thinking in


\(^{59}\) In 2005 Ruggie took a post as the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on human rights and transnational corporations and business enterprises.

\(^{60}\) Kuhn writes “In the absence of a competent body of rules, what restricts the scientist to a particular normal-scientific tradition. What can the phrase ‘direct inspection of paradigms’ mean? Partial answers to questions like these were developed by the late Ludwig Wittgenstein…. What need we know, Wittgenstein asked, in order that we apply terms like ‘chair,’ or ‘leaf,’ or ‘game’ unequivocally…?” Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 44.

Evolutionary biology with their classic 1972 article, “Punctuated Equilibria: an Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism.”⁶² This was in its own way a kind of textual fundamentalism, a Lutheran Reformation at the heart of the biological establishment. With a few explicit references to Kuhn’s “Paradigm Shifts,” they offered a temporal model of change—in the manner of Kuhn for science, Ruggie for economics, and Foucault for knowledge in general—that periods of stasis (in this case a relatively static gene pool) are interspersed with periods of rapid change. Biologists had spent too much time accounting for “gaps” in the fossil record, they argued, projecting missing links—Piltdown men, as it were—into them, to satisfy the expectations of theory instead of reading what was actually in the text.⁶³ After all, Darwin had “viewed the fossil record more as an embarrassment than as an aid to his theory.” The prevailing theory of “phyletic gradualism” (change within established lineages) carried with it several insidious consequences: “it colors our language. We are compelled to talk of ‘morphological breaks’ in order to be understood.”⁶⁴ Instead, the text of the fossil record should read be literally, without the accumulations of intervening tradition as Luther read the bible: “Many breaks in the fossil record are real; they express the way in which evolution occurs, not the fragments of an imperfect record,” concluding that “an inadequate picture has been guiding our thoughts on speciation for 100 years.”⁶⁵

The twentieth century was the century psychologists learned to believe in Freud’s “talking cure,” philosophers to play Wittgenstein’s “language games,” historians to agree with Hayden White that history is more about the “mode of emplotment” than the facts you choose to emplot, and social scientists of all stripes to recognize modernity for the fictional “metanarrative” Jean-François Lyotard declared it to be. It was also the century when computers learned to speak “binary,” geneticists to study gene “translation,” astrophysicists to abandon the age-old steady-state model of the universe and debate its “narrative” from the “Big Bang” (a term coined in 1949) to the “Big Crunch,” “Big Rip,” “Big Bounce,” or “Big Freeze.”⁶⁶

Briefly after the publication of Norbert Wiener’s 1948 classic, Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and Machine, the cybernetic movement that followed in both the United States and the Soviet Union seemed to herald the end of Babel and the promise of a new interdisciplinary “language of science” that would transcend both the political divisions of the Cold War and all the self-enclosed monasteries of disciplinary isolation. Slava Gerovitch succinctly summarized the elements of this new language:

This language combines concepts from physiology (homeostasis and reflex), psychology (behavior and goal), control engineering (control and feedback), thermodynamics (entropy and order), and communication engineering (information, signal, and noise) and

⁶³ In the lecture course I attended as a Freshman at Harvard College in 1997 (Biology 17), Gould frequently compared the fossil record to a text (lecture notes from 1997).
⁶⁴ Gould, “Punctuated equilibria,” 87.
⁶⁵ Gould, 96 and 86.
generalizes each of them to be equally applicable to living organisms, to self-regulating machines, and to human society.\textsuperscript{67}

From outer space to cyberspace, the second half of the twentieth-century offered a universe ruled by language, playing the “language game of science.”\textsuperscript{68}

But with the disintegration of world empires from Britain and France to the Soviet Union, universalism gave way to particularism, structuralist confidence to poststructuralist doubt. Imperial languages—and the university departments that studied them—discovered the limits of their grand narratives in the decolonized voices of their former subjects. In 1964 a voice from Kenya, the British-educated Ngugi wa Thiong’o stopped writing in English and started writing in his native tribal language of Gikuyu. In 1994 he bid a more formal farewell to the English language with *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Those who spoke only the language of empire yearned for a different native tongue. A voice from the new world island of Antigua, Jamaica Kincaid, explained why English was inadequate to tell her story:

\[\text{Isn’t it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that really mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal’s deed. The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal’s point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me.}\textsuperscript{69}

Confronting the multiplicity of identity and experience, departments of ethnic-, gender, and cultural studies proliferated at European and American universities. They emphasized the “productive” (rather than merely “reflective”) character of language, each speaking its own neologism-laden dialect and turning every question of being into a question of “discourse.” In the Babel of identity politics that was the postmodern condition, universities “gave voice” to voiceless linguistic particularity with dictionaries of Ebonics and Spanglish, studies of the particularities of Francophone and Anglophone literature, bemoaning what was “lost” in translation while still dreaming of a universal metalanguage to speak for justice on their behalf.

In the academic hit of the year 2000, *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri lamented the Babel of the globalized world, where struggles in—“Beijing, Los Angeles, Nablus, Chiapas, Paris, and Seoul… cannot communicate”:

This […] points toward an important political task: to construct a new common language that facilitates communication, as the languages of anti-imperialism and proletarian internationalism did for the struggles of the previous era. Perhaps this needs to be a new

\textsuperscript{67} For the Soviet side of this story revealing the linguistic colonization of Soviet science from the making of the first Soviet computer to biological Lysenkoism, see Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 3.

\textsuperscript{68} This phrase comes from J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 27.

type of communication that functions not on the basis of resemblances but on the basis of differences: a communication of singularities.\textsuperscript{70}

But was Babel really the enemy? Maybe the real enemy was a false Pentecost? This is what Dipesh Chakrabarty argued, pointing out the insidious “placelessness” in Hardt and Negri’s vision of global universalism.\textsuperscript{71} They had inherited Marx’s antagonism toward anything merely “local,” treating “locality” itself as a fabrication of discourse, something in need of linguistic deconstruction. Alerted to the limits of Marxist categories by seeing their application in an Indian context, Chakrabarty argued that the European ideas that Hardt and Negri seemed to take for granted were in fact the product of a particularly European time, place, and constellation of languages and set out to discover the “European origins of Marx’s thoughts” in all their ineluctable particularity.\textsuperscript{72} Chakrabarty wanted to “provincialize Europe”:

Once put into prose, a universal concept carries within it traces of what Gadamer would call ‘prejudice’—not a conscious bias but a sign that we think out of particular accretion of histories that are not always transparent to us. To provincialize Europe was then to know how universalistic thought was always and already modified by particular histories, whether or not we could excavate such pasts fully.\textsuperscript{73}

In explaining his aim, however, Chakrabarty relied not on an Indian compatriot but on another European—Hans Gadamer, a philosopher born and educated at a small-town German University of Marburg. So in the end, even in Chakrabarty’s work, one German speaker provincializes another, and Europe provincializes itself—or rather one version of Europe, the particularizing small German hometown university (insisting on Herderian Babel) provincializes the universalizing metropolitan world of Marx and Hegel at the University of Berlin (with its Kantian faith in the Pentecostal transparency and perfect translatability of all Languages).

There is nothing new about the claim that language has a productive role in the making of the world: “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God” (John 1:1). Goethe translated this claim for the nineteenth century as Faust struggles to produce an adequate German translation of the aforementioned Biblical passage: could “word [\textit{Wort}]” be better rendered by “thought [\textit{Gedanke}],” “power [\textit{Macht}],” or “deed [\textit{Tat}]”?\textsuperscript{74} But there was something new about the linguistic millenarianism of late twentieth-century scholarship, the hope or promise—so clearly on display in Soviet Tartu—that somehow by knowing language we would know ourselves and achieve salvation and liberation, whether by discovering our essence

\textsuperscript{71} “the struggle against capital must at the same time be a struggle against all forms of attachment to particular places, for the desire for absolute mobility can only be based on the cultivation of a planetary sense of attachment.” (xvii)
\textsuperscript{73} Chakrabarty, “Preface,” xiv.
\textsuperscript{74} Goethe, \textit{Faust. Part I}. Translated by C.F. MacIntyre. (New York: New Directions Paperback, 1949), 37.
The emergence of Tartu University’s Department of Semiotics coincides with the emergence of UC Berkeley’s Department of Rhetoric in the final third of the twentieth century. Each in their own way is a testament to the linguistic millenarianism of twentieth century life and thought with its paradoxical faith in the capacity of language to produce reality on the one hand while liberating us from it on the other.76

The Baltic world is not only a prime example of this story but also its intellectual point of origin. It was the Babel of Baltic Europe, after all, that gave birth both to the linguistic particularism of Herderian cultural nation—a “Language Community” or Sprachgemeinschaft—and the linguistic universalism of Ludwig Zamenhof’s Esperanto in Riga and Bialystok respectively, towns barely 300 miles apart. And nowhere in the twentieth century can we see more clearly the tension between these two ways of knowing and speaking than in the postwar linguistic preoccupations of Paul Ariste and Yuri Lotman. From their perch in bilingual Tartu on the edge of the Soviet Union in its only traditional German university town each buried himself passionately in the intimate details of his own native tongue—Estonian and Russian respectively—and the particularities of its folklore, mythology, and worldview, while at the same time dreaming of a universal language of science in which to converse with the world at large. It is the irony of their Tartu predicament—and perhaps twentieth-century academic life more generally—that neither of these scholars, for all their Baltic “diligence in the study of several learned languages,” ever really learned to speak to each other.77

75 For an interesting take on the Russian particularity of this story at the turn of the 20th century see Thomas Seifrid, The Word Made Self. The central tension here is between a view of language as a disinterested means of communication on the one hand, and as an expressive source of meaning on the other. And as the title implies, this is a book about the linguistic construction of the self more than it is about the communication with others, though arguably (as I have argued here) these are mutually constitutive processes. Language can only express the self only as it becomes a means of communication with others; this is widely recognized. What has been forgotten—a lacuna of the present intellectual climate—is the reverse, that language can only become a meaningful form of communication with others insofar as it expresses a self.


77 The quotation comes from the title of one of the first essays composed by Johann Gottfried Herder in 1764 when he first began collecting folksongs as a pastor in Riga. It attests to the power of his Baltic environment in cultivating his view of language, and especially the idea, shared by both Yuri Lotman and Paul Ariste two hundred years later, that multilingualism is essential for any kind of adequate perception of reality or meaningful progress. Johann Gottfried Herder, “On Diligence in the Study of Several Learned Languages,” Selected Early Works 1764-1767: Addresses, Essays, and Drafts; Fragments on Recent German Literature (University Part: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).