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# EUROPE, OR HOW TO ESCAPE BABEL<sup>1</sup>

MAURICE OLENDER

## ABSTRACT

Since William Jones announced the kinship of Sanskrit and the European languages, a massive body of scholarship has illuminated the development of the so-called “Indo-European” language group. This new historical philology has enormous technical achievements to its credit. But almost from the start, it became entangled with prejudices and myths—with efforts to recreate not only the lost language, but also the lost—and superior—civilization of the Indo-European ancestors. This drive to determine the identity and nature of the first language of humanity was deeply rooted in both near eastern and western traditions. The Bible described the perfect, transparent language of Adam and followed its degeneration, caused by human sin, into the multiple, opaque languages of later nations. The three sons of Noah became, for Jewish and early Christian writers, the founders of three distinct human groups. By the sixth and seventh centuries, historians began to magnify the deeds of certain later peoples, such as the Scythians and Goths, and to connect them with the biblical genealogy of languages and races. And in the Renaissance, speculative historical etymology took root and flourished, as national pride led European intellectuals to assert that their own modern languages—for example, Flemish—either could be identified with the original one or offered the closest surviving approximation to it. Japheth, Noah’s favorite son and the forefather of the Europeans, emerged as the hero who had preserved the original language in its purity. A new history of the European languages developed, one which traced them back to the language of the barbarian Scythians and emphasized the connections between Persian and European languages. It came to seem implausible that the European languages derived from Hebrew. By the eighteenth century, in short, all the preconditions were present for a discovery that the ancestors of the Europeans, like the common ancestor of their languages, had been independent of Semitic influence. A modern scholarly thesis whose political and intellectual consequences are still working themselves out reveals the continuing impact of a millennial tradition of speculation about language and history.

## INTRODUCTION—ETYMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS: SEDUCTION AND PERSUASION

When Anthony Grafton, acting with Natalie Zemon Davis and Suzanne Marchand, invited me to a session of the Davis Center colloquium on “Proof and Persuasion,” he explained that my presentation could take the form of simply “saying a few words” to explain the relation of my study of “Europe and Babel”

1. Elaborated in the course of my seminars at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, this text was discussed at the Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University, in a colloquium organized in January, 1993 by Natalie Zemon Davis, Suzanne Marchand, and Anthony

to my research in progress and to my book on *The Languages of Paradise*.<sup>2</sup> But several considerations deterred me from accepting this proposal. The text to be discussed here could have served, in chronological terms, as a sort of preface to my book, but the final pages make it a sort of postscript as well. Moreover, it seemed risky to “say a few words” about my current research project, which is necessarily still tentative, and deals with different periods, in which several themes related to the topics of the original intersect. I therefore decided to offer several supplementary “footnotes”—new material, necessarily subject to Grafton’s meditations on this theme. These observations and quotations will serve to clarify a single aspect of my text: the treatment of proofs from etymology. More precisely, they deal with a number of savants’ opinions on the etymological practice that consists of examining a word at its root: of taking the word apart to make it confess a truth which coincides, these writers hold, with a certain degree of forgetfulness.

In his 1953 essay *La preuve par l’étymologie*, Jean Paulhan describes the efforts of savants to show that words were always endowed with “arguments and proofs”—or, as he puts it, that one must always confront “une langue motivée.”<sup>3</sup> Paulhan shows that etymologies and puns are always close to one another: the difference between them is a moral one, “the distance that separates the licit from the illicit, the acceptable from the forbidden.”<sup>4</sup> Paulhan points out that if the linguists have absolutely rejected etymology, they have done so rather because it has such a seductive, deceptive appeal than because it has no “secrets” to offer. But that, he explains, “is a sort of esoteric aspect which falls outside our subject matter.”<sup>5</sup> Never mind: poets, writers, and all sorts of devotees of literature still know the fascination of what has seemed, to generations of readers, a “langue motivée.” Here, then, are the few footnotes I said I would provide. I offer them to you, subject to the rigorous scrutiny of Hans Aarsleff, author some time ago of a study of etymology in Leibniz, and Josine Blok, whose thesis on Amazons begins with pages on ancient views of etymology.<sup>6</sup>

In his dissertation *De l’influence des opinions sur le langage, et du langage sur les opinions* of 1759, Michaelis writes:

Grammarians often praise etymology lavishly [two pages later, he refers to “the immense productivity of etymology”]. I agree that it *never proves the truth* of a proposition: but it *preserves truths*. It is a sort of library, whose contents include all sorts of useful novelties. . . . I also agree that this *source of truths* can become a *source of errors* when the grammarian or the philosopher tries to derive from it *either proofs* for their assertions or *real definitions*: its waves are not pure, *truths and errors are rolled about in it together*.

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Grafton. Part of this work was also presented to the French department of Johns Hopkins University, where I was hosted by Wilda Anderson and Milad Doueïhi. Finally, at the invitation of Nicole Loraux, these pages were the object of two seminars at the EHESS, at the Programme de Recherches Interdisciplinaires “Modern Usage of Antiquity.” I retain world rights to this article.

2. Maurice Olander, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, transl. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992).

3. J. Paulhan, *La Preuve par l’étymologie* [1953] (Paris, 1988), 27.

4. *Ibid.*, 81–82.

5. *Ibid.*, 45–46, 82.

6. For Aarsleff, see below, n. 64.

I would like to draw a parallel between etymological propositions and the disconnected propositions that are published as *Pensées*, which no one thinks of supplying with a rigorous proof. Each etymology shows me that someone, in a given nation, thought in a given manner. To determine whether his idea was good or bad requires a separate inquiry which has nothing in common with etymology. To that extent etymology resembles libraries: there too the good and the bad are mixed together.<sup>7</sup>

I consulted Michaelis's text of 1759, awarded a prize by the Berlin Academy, in the French version of 1762, published at Bremen by George Louis Förster. This version was enlarged and corrected by the author.

At almost the same time, in 1756, Turgot published the article on "Etymology" in the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>8</sup> One learns from it that "etymology, like all conjectural arts, is made up of two parts: the art of forming conjectures or suppositions, and the art of verifying them—or, in other words, inventions and criticism." Below, basing himself on the traditional use of analogies, Turgot states what could be the rule of all etymological free association, when he advises researchers to devote themselves

to meditation, or, to put it perhaps a little better, to engage in that careless form of reverie in which the mind seems to give up its right to summon its thoughts to pass in review before it, and to contemplate, in the midst of this *apparent confusion*, a crowd of unexpected images and juxtapositions, produced by the rapid fluctuation of ideas, which are brought about, one after another, by *connections as hard to discern as they are numerous*. Thus one has, not the rules of invention, but the preparations necessary for anyone who wants to practice any form of invention. Here we have only to apply it to etymological problems, indicating the most striking connections and the main analogies which can serve as a foundation for plausible conjectures.<sup>9</sup>

Michaelis, in the passage cited above, identifies "language" with "archives that flame cannot destroy, and that cannot perish unless the nation as a whole is destroyed." Turgot, by contrast, sees in etymology the possibility "of restoring, to some extent, lost languages. . . . The weakest gleams are valuable, especially when they are the only ones."

We will return shortly, in connection with a text by Dante, to the "lost language," which was "forgotten" because of the great confusion of Babel. But in the nineteenth century a great many writers would see Sanskrit as one of the possible identities of this language, which was described as "incomparable."

In his *Ueber die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* of 1808, Friedrich Schlegel drew on all the powers of the new natural science to create unsuspected philological visions, not for the first time. In the course of the nineteenth century, historians would understand nature as the divine incarnation of providential rule. In Schlegel, the new sciences of nature that announce the possibility of new sciences of man are specifically designated as, among others, geology, mineralogy, and comparative anatomy. Eventually they would be joined by

7. J. D. Michaelis, *De l'influence des opinions sur le langage, et du langage sur les opinions* (Bremen, 1762), 29–30 (italics mine).

8. 1772 edition, vol. 17.

9. *Ibid.*, 498 (italics mine).

the “linguistic paleontology” of Adolphe Pictet.<sup>10</sup> This appeal to the natural sciences served to legitimate philology, a young discipline which found it hard to disentangle itself from the field of religion. Nietzsche was on the mark when he said, echoing Novalis, that philology was to a great extent the heir, often without realizing it, of the interpretation of the revealed Text of the Bible.

Let us return to etymology: to the way in which authors have often questioned its legitimacy, even its effectiveness, though they continued to take it into account, and even used it as a proof and, in any event, as one more very ordinary instrument of persuasive rhetoric.

William Jones did not invent the idea of an “Indo-European” language, but he signed its academic identity card in his well-known discourse of 2 February 1786, in which he emphasized the affinity of Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit. At the start of his third discourse *On the Hindus* he proclaimed:

Etymology has, no doubt, some use in historical researches; but it is a medium of proof so very fallacious, that, where it elucidates one fact, it obscures a thousand, and more frequently borders on the ridiculous, than leads to any solid conclusion; it rarely carries with it any internal power of conviction from a resemblance of sounds or similarity of letters; yet often, where it is wholly unassisted by these advantages, it may be indisputably proved by extinsick evidence.<sup>11</sup>

Jones did not deprive himself of the opportunity to play with morphological resemblances, as he did when he drew parallels between the names of classical deities and those he discovered in Hindu texts. Nonetheless, he insists here on the deceptive side of etymological argument, which “obscures” even as it “elucidates.” This chiaroscuro version of etymology is an efficient means of seduction. It operates as a diversion and has more than one thing in common with the evasive movements of persuasion — that is, the Greek *peitho*, whose innumerable twists, turns, and effects Marcel Detienne has described so well in *Les Maîtres de vérité en Grèce archaïque*. He points out that “Peitho is one aspect, and a necessary one, of Aletheia [Truth]”; persuasion is essential for the truth, the Greek name for which evokes forgetfulness (Lethe). “What is persuasion, then?” asks Detienne. “In mythical thought, Peitho is a divinity, omnipotent over gods as well as men: only Death can resist her.”<sup>12</sup> Here he alludes to a fragment of Aeschylus. Detienne also shows that Peitho has “honeyworded enchantments” at her disposal (Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 172).

One might think that this has to do only with ancient, mythical ways of thinking. But it remains to be determined if a reading of the founding texts of nineteenth-century comparative philology and linguistics will make it possible to detect a narrow frontier between what are conventionally designated by the twin terms *logos* and *mythos*. My research on the themes of *The Languages of Paradise* tried to show that there was a permeable membrane, and that the

10. On these points see the chapters on Renan, F. Max Müller, and Pictet in *The Languages of Paradise*.

11. W. Jones, “The Third Discourse,” *Asiatic Researches* [1788] (London, 1799); for this text and its context, see *The Languages of Paradise*, 6ff., 149 n. 29.

12. M. Detienne, *Les Maîtres de vérité en Grèce archaïque* (Paris, 1967), 62.

traffic between science and religion was continual. More important, the cases of Renan and Max Müller both reveal, though on different levels, how science and religion supported one another—and also how, in the last century, new clerical ideas enable religion to base itself on science, and vice versa.<sup>13</sup>

I close this introduction with a quotation which could serve as an epigraph to the work I carried out on problems of the original language in my seminars at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. At the start of the fourteenth century, Dante mocked in his *De vulgari eloquentia* the inhabitants of tiny villages who cherished the belief that they possessed the secrets of the language of Paradise and spoke the language of Adam. As an example, he cited Pietramala, a lost hamlet somewhere between Florence and Bologna. In the same passage, in *De vulgari* 1.6, Dante, in describing the language of Adam, speaks of “the idiom which, one thinks, was used by the man without a mother, the man without milk—the man who experienced no childhood and no growing up.”

This mortal dream of escaping the mother’s milk, this dream of not having been borne by a woman, seems to me to provide an illuminating poetic formulation, and one that nicely illustrates the Adamitic seductions that did so much to inspire the national, and later nationalist, search for an original language. I stop here, at the point where a connecting road might start—one that would enable us to pass from etymology to autochthony, from the origin of language to the imagined birth of a nation, from the man with no mother . . . to the man born from the earth, to those old myths of autochthony whose “benefits” Nicole Loraux has described so well.<sup>14</sup> The passage from one set of themes to the other, the way in which etymology and autochthony can follow the same routes, was explicitly described by Père Louis Thomassin in 1690, in *La Méthode d’étudier et d’enseigner chrestienement et utilement la Grammaire, ou les Langues par rapport à l’Ecriture sainte en les reduisant toutes à l’Hébreu*.

Debates about the origin of the oldest European language have often turned into discussions of the primordial languages of humanity. In the garden of Eden, was an oriental or occidental, a northern or southern, language spoken? The answer to this question, which was asked with great force during the Renaissance, molded beliefs about the origin of a European linguistic community. Leibniz, remembering the writings of Becanus, opted for Flemish, the Germanic language which had “as many and more marks of something primitive as Hebrew itself.”<sup>15</sup>

In the background, orienting in various ways the questions and answers of scholars, the Holy Scriptures tell the story of a God who created the world in

13. As two extreme cases one could cite those of Louis Pasteur and Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman. For further illustrations see the chapters on Renan, Pictet, Müller, and Grau in *The Languages of Paradise*.

14. N. Loraux, “Les bénéfices de l’autochthonie,” *Le Genre humain* 3–4 (1982), 238–253.

15. G. W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain* [1704] in *Oeuvres philosophiques I*, ed. P. Janet (Paris, 1900), 243. For van Gorp, called Goropius Becanus, see below. This article presents an augmented version of a text published by Flammarion Press, *L’Esprit de l’Europe*, ed. A. Compagnon and J. Seebacher (Paris, 1993).

six days, speaking several words of a language which dispelled the original chaos. God, the efficacious Word, bestowed speech upon a singular creature, different from all the others, that is, humankind. In turn, humankind imposed a name on the other creatures. But no one knows the language of Adam and Eve anymore.<sup>16</sup> At Babel, confounding the sounds and senses, God struck humanity with a great amnesia, a forgetting of the first words. Since then nothing can be as it was. The plurality and opacity of idioms are substituted for the unity of an immediate and transparent language. Caught in the tempest of confusion, mortals in order to communicate must hereafter strive to find common words.

### I. JAPHETHIC EUROPE

From the Flood to Babel, another humanity is put in place; Noah is its new ancestor, with his three sons by whom “the whole earth was peopled” (Gen.9.1). In Genesis, the multiplication of languages corresponds to the geographic distribution of nations “after their families, after their tongues, in their lands, and after their nations” (Gen.10.31). This great human diaspora is organized according to a geography of malediction and benediction closely associated with Noah’s shameless drunkenness. His son Ham does not hesitate, according to the Christian exegetes inspired by Philo of Alexandria,<sup>17</sup> to expose publicly his Father’s obscenity by laughing and making fun of his nudity. Ham therefore sees his cursed descendants become “servant of servants . . . unto his brethren” (Gen.9.25); the Church Fathers, who had read Josephus,<sup>18</sup> attribute the peopling of Africa to him. To his two brothers who “went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness” (Gen.9.23), tradition grants two other continents. Shem, marked in Genesis by his privileged link to the eternal Elohim, receives Asia. Japheth, whose Hebraic name evokes “beauty” as well as “openness,” the “wide space” of a legacy capable of “dilation” and “expansion,” will be the

16. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, IX, 1, 11, ed. M. Reydellet (Paris, 1984), 39, emphasizes the difficulty of knowing the language that God used “at the beginning of the world when he says: *Fiat lux*.” And Dante, in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I, 9, 6, ed. G. B. Squarotti (Turin, 1983), 414, writes that the confusion of Babel was nothing other than “the forgetting of the first language” (post confusionem illam que nil aliud fuit quam prioris oblivio). If in the *Divine Comedy* (*Paradise*, XXVI, 124), he points out that the language of Adam and Eve was entirely extinguished, elsewhere in the *De Vulgari* (VI and VII), taking up an old argument (see below, note 28), Dante affirms that the original language was saved by Heber and his family. For this episode, see below and note 42.

17. *Questiones et solutiones in Genesim* II, 71, ed. C. Mercier (Paris, 1979), 316; *De sobrietate* 1, 6 and 32 (Paris, 1962), 128–130, 142. On this subject, see the commentaries of M. Harl, *La Bible d’Alexandrie, La Genèse* (Paris, 1986), 142–143. Josephus also speaks of “laughter” and “obscenity.” See note 18.

18. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquités judaïques*, I, 6, 2–3, ed. E. Nodet (Paris, 1992), 39–42. On the impact of this “curse,” the metaphoric weight of which still informs discussions on Africa today, see J.-L. Amselle’s discussion in *Cahiers d’études africaines* XXXI, 1–2 = 121–122 (1991), 7–8 (issue entitled “La Malédiction”).

father of Europe. For the readers of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the etymological fiction of a “Euru-opa,” meaning “wide vision,” could serve to confirm the providential ambition of this continent which “sees far” (*eurus, ops*). Since Hecataeus of Miletus in the sixth century B.C. the Greeks had divided the world into three parts: Africa, Asia, and Europe. From this point on, this ancient geography was christianized thanks to the new biblical ancestors of humanity.<sup>19</sup>

Combining these strategies of appropriation of old biblical promises with the desire to integrate pagan knowledge and myths in order to better assimilate them, the early Church recognized the three sons of Noah – Shem, Ham, and Japheth – under the names Cronos, Titan, and Japheth.<sup>20</sup> Japheth, the most bellicose of the sons of Uranus (sky) and Gaia (earth), progenitor of a line of rebels, thereafter pursued his career as an energetic pioneer. Thus we encounter him again in the Christian Europe of the last century at the head of a civilization combining two strains of memory, “Semitic” and “Aryan” or “Jap(h)ethic,” the inequality of whose valences is exacerbated when Renan associates the titanic figure of Japheth with the victory of Progress.<sup>21</sup>

In Josephus, the descendants of Shem go forth and populate “Asia to the Indian Ocean”; the sons of Japheth advance “in Asia to the river *Tanaïs* (the Don) and in Europe to *Gadeira* (Cadiz).”<sup>22</sup> According to the detailed “little Genesis” (the *Book of Jubilee*, composed undoubtedly in the second century B.C.), “all that is to the north [of the Don] belongs to Japheth and all that is to the south belongs to Shem.” If it is hot in the country of Ham, the legacy of Japheth includes “a great land in the north” where it is cold. “As to the country of Shem, it is neither hot, nor cool, but tempered by cold and heat.”<sup>23</sup>

This linguistic geography inspired the church fathers. To it Cassiodorus’s *History of the Goths* (sixth century) – known only by the summary of his con-

19. Among the Christian texts offering interpretations of Shem and Japheth, see, for example, Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XVI, I-III, ed B. Dombart, A. Kalb, G. Bardy, and G. Combès (Bruges, 1960), 176–194; Saint Jerome, *Liber de nominibus hebraicis*, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (hereafter referred to as P. L.) 23 (1883), II, col. 828: *Sem, nomen, vel nominatus*; col. 824: *Japheth, Latitudo*; see also Saint Jerome, *Liber Hebraicarum Questionum in Genesim*, in *ibid.*, col. 998–999. Also see E. Mangenot, “Genèse, prophéties messianiques” in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (1920), VI, col. 1212–1213. Some indications regarding the Greek term “*Eurôpê*” are found in the *Kleine Pauly* (1975), II, col. 446–449. See also Hecataeus of Miletus, in the same lexicon, II, col. 976–980.

20. *Oracles Sybillins*, III, 105ff., ed. J. Geffcken (Leipzig, 1903), 55ff. Books III, IV, and V are attributed to a Jewish source. The set of twelve books (most of which are written in Greek hexameter) was compiled and prefaced by an anonymous Christian author. See the modern French edition of V. Nikiprowetzky, published in *La Bible: Ecrits intertestamentaires*, ed. A. Dupont-Sommer and M. Philonenko (Paris, 1987), 1037–1140.

21. Ernest Renan, *L’Avenir de la science*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. H. Psichari (Paris, 1949), III, 753.

22. Josephus, *Antiquités*, I, VI, 1–4, 36–43.

23. *Jubilees*, VIII, 10–30, transl. A. Caquot, in *Ecrits Intertestamentaires*, 675–678. For the discrepancy in representations of the earth between Josephus and the *Book of Jubilees*, cf. F. Schmidt, “Naissance d’une géographie juive,” in *Moïse géographe: Recherches sur les représentations juives et chrétienne de l’espace*, ed. A. Desreumaux and F. Schmidt (Paris, 1988), 16–27.

temporary Jordanès — as well as the writings of Isidore of Seville added a national dimension, expressed as a utopian discourse on the origins of Europe. The theoretical landscape is transformed: it is now of a great mythical island named *Scandza*, “which is like the factory of the tribes (*officina gentium*) or the womb of nations (*vagina nationum*), from which the Goths are said to have issued.”<sup>24</sup> Cassiodorus/Jordanès specifies, during the 550s when these paragraphs were written, that at “the beginning” it was from this island that the nation of the Goths “burst forth and swarmed like bees over European territory.”<sup>25</sup>

A few decades later Isidore described the Goths as a primordial “nation” because he considered their tribe to be born of the first division of peoples after the Flood. He then assures us that the Scythians and Goths “derive their origin” from Magog, the second son of Japheth. Isidore stresses again that the descendants of Japheth “possess the middle part of Asia and all of Europe to the Britannic Ocean.”<sup>26</sup>

This national knowledge of peoples and their languages, this way of magnifying Gothic ancestors, transforming them into parents of a new biblical humanity, no doubt inspired more than one linguistic construction in medieval and modern Europe.

## II. FROM FLEMISH TO HEBREW

Henceforth the genealogical competition to establish ancestors is coupled with the conceptualizing of languages over the *longue durée*. The foregrounding of linguistic criteria, stimulating the idea of an original prototype common to Europe’s various idioms, incited certain authors to rethink the central position of Hebrew. The classification of languages into “families,” the attempt to discern their modes of filiation, of diversification and of alteration, also permitted Dante to systematize a particular diachrony. In his *Vulgar Eloquence*, written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Dante asks his readers to “take into consideration” the natural and historical transformation of dialects varying “in space and in time.”<sup>27</sup> This kind of observation of the development of idioms is accompanied in many authors by theoretical speculations which seek to recognize, in one or another regional dialect, the sublime, original language. (Dante himself deemed such speculation “obscene,” ridiculing all who believed that his or her maternal language “is the same as that which Adam spoke.”<sup>28</sup>)

24. Jordanès, *Getica*, IV, 25, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin, 1882), 60. For analysis and contextualization of these passages, see J. Svennung, *Jordanès und Scandia: Kritischexegetische Studien* (Stockholm, 1967), 208ff.; G. Dagron and L. Marin, “Discours utopique et récit des origines,” *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* 26 (March–April, 1971), 290–327. For Cassiodorus and Jordanès, see A. Momigliano, “Cassiodorus and Italian Culture of His Time,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 41 (1955), 207–245. K. Pomian underlines the importance of this literature in *L’Europe et ses nations* (Paris, 1990), 23ff.

25. Jordanès, *Getica*, I, 9, 55–56.

26. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* IX, 2, 26–37. In this volume, M. Reydellet observes that Isidore does not appear to make distinct use of *gens* and *natio*, 42, note 25.

27. Dante, *De Vulgari eloquentia*, I, 9, 7, 416.

28. *Ibid.*, I, 6, 2, 396.

Nearly three centuries later, the Swedish author Andreas Kempe published a treatise entitled *The Languages of Paradise* (1688). In this satire, Kempe mocks scholarly disputations which attempt to determine the language of the first Edenic conversations between God, Adam, Eve, and the serpent.<sup>29</sup>

Speculations of this kind did not prevent authors from paying minute attention to the roots of words and their pronunciation. By means of an ethnolinguistics which ascertained phonetic similitudes and differences, manipulated terms by composing and decomposing them, and finally appealed to them to prove an ultimate truth with the aid of Cratylean etymologies, the scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rewrote the history of the origins of human speech in a way that would be consistent with the expectations of a continent in search of a future. Each region of Europe<sup>30</sup> thus had its doctors “of Languages of Paradise,” or specialists in the study of some of their Babelian derivatives. The Flemish “laboratory” was particularly exemplary in these matters of linguistic autochthony.

The eponymous hero of the old Japhethic continent was thus able to take up service again under the pen of a physician, Jan van Gorp, called Goropius Becanus (1518–1572), who published his *Origines Antwerpianae* in 1569.<sup>31</sup> For reasons both national and theological, Becanus, at work in the Low Countries riven by tensions between Catholics and Protestants, reacted against the privileging of French and Spanish. In a country where the use of Flemish could be a form of resistance, Becanus adopted a radical position by affirming that “Cimbrian,” the ancestor of Dutch, was the primordial language from which Hebrew derived. If few scholars followed him on this point, if a great number criticized his daring etymologies, they nonetheless granted him some credit, as Leibniz was still to do at the beginning of the eighteenth century. By playing with words, Becanus contributed to the formation of a mode of lexical manipulation which gave rise to new forms of linguistic comparativism.

Take, for example, Japheth’s first son, Gomer. To associate his name intimately with that of the Cimbri and the Cimmerians, whom he took to be the

29. For information and bibliography on Kempe, see Olender, *Languages of Paradise*, 1.

30. For a “European Tour” of these questions and many others, see A. Borst, *Der Turmblau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker I-IV* (Stuttgart, 1957–1963). On Pier Francesco Giambullari’s search for the “origin of the Florentine language,” which he links with an Etruscan language, related to the Hebraic and Chaldean languages, see Giambullari, “Origine della lingua Fiorentina,” in *Le Lezioni ed Il Gello* (1546), in *Biblioteca Scelta di Opere italiane antiche e moderne* (Milan, 1827), XXII, 223–224. See also C. G. Dubois, “Postérité des langues d’Aram: l’hypothèse sémitique dans l’origine imaginée de l’étrusque au XVIème siècle,” in *L’hébreu au temps de la Renaissance*, ed. I. Zinguer (Leiden, 1992), 129–153.

31. For information on the life and work of J. van Gorp, see Eduard Frederickx, *Ioannes Goropius Becanus (1519–1573)* (Louvain, 1973); G. J. Metcalf, “The Indo-European Hypothesis in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms*, ed. Dell H. Hymes (London, 1974), 233–257; D. Droixhe, *La linguistique et l’appel de l’histoire (1600–1800): Rationalisme et révolutions positivistes* (Paris, 1978), see index; A. Grafton, “Traditions of Invention and Inventions of Tradition in Renaissance Italy: Annius of Viterbo,” in his *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 99–101.

ancestors of the Aduatici, founders of Antwerp, Becanus assumed that the first letter of Gomer, the Hebrew *gimmel*, had been pronounced in the past like a Greek *kappa*. Then, by a play of permutations and of slippages of related letters (the *cognatae litterae* of Varro),<sup>32</sup> he hypothesized similarities authorizing him to establish correspondences between Gomer and *Cimbri*. Finally, recalling that *gimer* is a conjugated form of the verb *gomer* which means in Hebrew “to finish” or “to complete,” he concluded by writing *Gimer, id est perfecit*.<sup>33</sup> This sense of a “perfect accomplishment” conforms rigorously to the role of “founding hero” that Becanus assigns to Gomer, the Cimmerian<sup>34</sup> son of Japheth. Regarding this “biblical adaptation” of the mythical ancestors of Europe which prospered in the following generations, Turgot wrote in 1756 in the article “étymologie” in the *Encyclopédie*: “One sees all the patriarchs of the Old Testament and their history, another sees only Swedish or Celtic heroes.”<sup>35</sup>

Another image, another tactic. The author of the *Origines Antwerpianae* recognizes in the Phrygian *becos* the Flemish *becker*, he who makes bread, the “baker.” He therefore gives an unexpected continuation to the tale told by Herodotus of a certain Psammetichus who searched for the identity of the most ancient people. After having decreed that two newborn babies be isolated, the pharaoh enjoins the shepherd who is feeding them never to address a single word to them. The story tells how the infants, reaching the age of two, “spoke the word *becos*.” Since it is thus that the Phrygians designate “bread,” Psammetichus concedes the anteriority of the Phrygians to the Egyptians, whom he previously had considered “the most ancient of all men.” For his part Becanus concluded from this evidence that the Flemish are the most ancient, since “they call the men who make their bread *Becker*. The King’s experiment shows therefore that the language of the inhabitants of Antwerp must be considered to be the most ancient, and therefore the most noble (*lingua antiquissima . . . nobilissima*).”<sup>36</sup>

32. *De Lingua latina*, ed. P. Flaubert (Paris, 1985), VI, 3ff., where Varro acknowledges his debt to Chrysippus, Antipater, and the Grammarians. For the *cognatae litterae*, P. Diderichsen, “The Foundation of Comparative Linguistics: Revolution or Continuation?,” *Studies in the History of Linguistics*, 280–281, 288–290.

33. *Origines Antwerpianae*..., (Antwerp, 1569), Book IV, 375; for the *cognatae litterae*, 374.

34. The links between Japheth, Gomer, and the Cimmerians developed over the centuries. Renan writes in his *Prière sur l’Acropole* that Japheth was born “to barbarian parents, among the good and virtuous Cimmerians who live on the shore of a gloomy ocean . . .,” *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1948), II, 755. The decoding of cuneiform texts “intensified” these questions by transforming them. E. Dhorme, the editor of the *Ancien testament* (Paris, 1956–1959), writes in his classic study on “the people born of Japheth, according to chapter 10 of Genesis,” “il est incontestable que Gomer correspond à Gimirri des textes cunéiformes, que les Grecs ont rendu par *Kimmérioi*, les Cimmériens,” E. Dhorme, *Recueil. Dhorme. Etudes bibliques et orientales* (Paris, 1951), 169.

35. *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire universel raisonné des connaissances humaines* (1772), XVII, 519. Concerning manuscripts, the attribution of the article “étymologie” to Turgot, and the influence of the “Président de Brosses” on these pages, see *Oeuvres de Turgot*, ed. G. Schelle (Paris, 1913), I, 473–474, note a, and 516–517, note a. For the “linguistic primitivism of Turgot,” see D. Droixhe, “Le Primitivisme linguistique de Turgot,” in *Primitivisme et mythes des origines dans la France des Lumières (1680–1820)* (Paris, 1989), 59–86.

36. Herodotus, *Histoire*, ed. P. E. Legrand (Paris, 1936), II, 2, 65–67. J. van Gorp, *Origines . . . Praefatio* (no pagination: 11,12), and book V, *De Indoscythica*, 551–552. See also *idem*,

If Becanus believed that the speech of his ancestors could be ranked with Phrygian, he deemed otherwise for Hebrew, a younger language. He illustrated this by means of the term “*iaïn*,” which designates the intoxicating wine of Noah; he claimed that this Hebrew term is a derivative of “wain,” Flemish “wine.”<sup>37</sup> But, if Hebrew is not the oldest idiom, why then is the Bible written in this late dialect rather than in the primordial language of Becanus’s ancestors—the language he calls “Thouts or Thuyts,” equivalents of “Douts” which in Flemish designates that which is “the most ancient”?<sup>38</sup> His answer: it is no more necessary that the Bible be written in the sublime, original language than that Christ be born to rich parents.<sup>39</sup>

What remains to be explained is the forgetting of the original language. Whether it was Hebrew or Flemish, how could it escape the confusion of Babel, how did it transcend the punishment meted out upon the nations for their “impious pride”?<sup>40</sup> How can the recovery of what had been irreparably lost to humanity be explained? Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine recounted how Heber, the great grandson of Shem, preserved in his family “the language that all once spoke” and that has since been called “hebraic.”<sup>41</sup> Dante similarly remembered the language of Heber and his sons the Hebrews: “To them alone [Hebrew] remained after Babel in order that our Redeemer, who was to be born among them as a man, would cause the language of grace rather than the language of confusion to come to fruition.”<sup>42</sup>

To save the Adamic language from Babel, Becanus made another choice: he substituted Japheth for Shem, the father of the northern languages for that of the oriental languages. Becanus justified this transfer of linguistic competence to Japheth by Noah’s preference for this son, who was also the most European of the biblical heroes. Thus, while the other members of his numerous family left to construct the tower of dissension, Noah kept Japheth the beloved and his family close to him.<sup>43</sup> Since this time the Cimmerians and the Cimbrians, as well as the Scythians—descendants of Gomer, son of Japheth and grandson

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*Opera . . . Hactenus in lucem non edita: nempe, Hermathena, Hieroglyphica . . .* (Antwerp, 1580), book IV, 62.

37. Van Gorp, *Origines . . .*, 555 (*pro Wain Jain discere*).

38. *Ibid.*, 460: “Nostre lingua hactenus dicimus Thouts vel Thuyts, vel media littera Douts vel Duyts, Douts autem idem est quod maximus natu . . .”; see also *ibid.*, 463; much later, in the nineteenth century, a book by the Baron of Ryckhold, Philippe de Bounam, *Flamand, langue primordiale* (Liège, 1868) praises Flemish as a primordial language. See also D. Droixhe, “Langues mères, vierges folles,” in *Le Genre humain* 21 (a volume entitled “Langues mégalomanes”) (1990), 141–148.

39. Van Gorp, *Origines*, 537: “Neque vero necesse fuit, sacra Dei oracula, primo et perfectissimo sermone perscribi, non magis, quam Christum et ditissimis nasci, et vestitu uti, et victu splendidissimo.”

40. Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XVI, 11, 1, 222.

41. Saint Jerome, *Liber Hebraicarum Quaestionum in Genesim, P.L.*, 23, vol. 2 (1883), col. 1004: *Heber, a quo Hebraei*; saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XVI, 11, 1–2 (222–224).

42. Dante, *De vulgari*, I, 6, 6, 400.

43. Van Gorp, *Origines*, 532–534.

of Noah — along with the other members of the Germanic family, have possessed the secrets of the first language given by God.

Becanus ends his account by recalling that Dutch still preserves the memory of the misadventure of those who went astray at Babel. Thus, when the descendants of Japheth encountered their cousins returning from Babel and were no longer able to understand them, they designated their pidgin tongue by the verb “*babelen*,”<sup>44</sup> which in Flemish means “gibberish.”

By means of etymological proofs and geographical, historical, and linguistic arguments, scholars emphasized the non-oriental dimension of the origins of Europe.<sup>45</sup> Even if generally refusing to adopt the radical positions of Becanus, they retained Hebrew as the source of biblical revelation and as the first language of human thought; they also insisted on a role for European languages. Thus, though in the *Van t'beghin der eerster volcken van Europen, insonderheyt vanden oorspronck ende saecken der Neder-Landeren* (1614), the Bruges scholar Adriaen van Scrieck still considered Hebrew to be the *primogenia*, he added to this “first-born” a “neighbor language, quite close, the *lingua Iaphetica*.” The “second” mother tongue, it is for him “Scythian, Celtic, Teutonic, Belgian, Danish, and northern.”<sup>46</sup>

This second mother language, arising from the age immediately after Babel, is characterized by the same qualities of transparency as Adamic speech. This quasi-primordial idiom, whose vocabulary expresses the essence of things, is more archaic than Greek and Latin; the ancients “lied”<sup>47</sup> when they deemed themselves “older” than the Scythians. This people, who together with the Celts ended up occupying “all of Europe”<sup>48</sup> in the course of their migrations “in the countries which they conquered,” left their names to the rivers and mountains they crossed. Searching for this first European language, van Scrieck continued:

44. *Ibid.*, 551: “Babelen, id est, tam confuse et inarticulate loqui, ut non intelligatur”; book VI, 572.

45. For these questions, see M.-L. Demonet-Launay, “La désacralization de l’hébreu au XVIème siècle,” in *L’hebreu au temps*, 154–171; by the same author, “L’hébreu dans la Renaissance française,” *Jewish Language Review* 5 (1985), 13–37. See also D. Droixhe, “La crise de l’hébreu langumère au XVIIème siècle,” in the series *Mythes, critique et histoire* 6 (Paris, 1992), 65–99.

46. Adriaen van Scrieck, Heere van Rodorne, *Van t'beghin der eerster volcken van Europen, insonderheyt vanden oorspronck ende saecken der Neder-Landren. XXIII Boecken, Met betoon vande dwalinghen der Griecken ende Latinen op t'selve Beghin ende den ghemeynen Oorspronck . . .* (Ypres, 1614). In the complementary treatise of 1615, *Monitorum secundorum Libri V . . . De vera et falsa origine monumentum sive Europe Rediviva*, p.4 of the *Praefatio*, in the margin is found: *Hebraica lingua primogenia. Iaphetica sive Celtica lingua, primogenia proxima*. Also on page 4: *Hebraica revera linguam esse primogeniam, Iapheticam vero secundam, quam et Scythicam, Ceticam, Teutonicam, Belgicam, Danicam et Septemtrionalem nunc vocamus; quodque ea lingua Iaphetica primis temporibus fuit universalis, et omnino antiquior sit Graeca et Latina . . .* For interpretations of van Scrieck, see D. Droixhe, *La linguistique*; P. Swiggers, “Adrianus Schrieckius: de la langue des Scythes à l’Europe linguistique,” in *Histoire, épistémologie, langage* 6 (1984), 17–35. Edited by D. Droixhe, this volume is devoted to the “Genesis of Indo-European comparativism.”

47. Van Scrieck, *Van t'beghin*, book 23, chapter 30, 550: “dat dese VELD-SCHE volcken ouder zn dan de Latinen ende Griecken . . . ; . . . dat alle de Griecken hebben ghelogen in haer beghin ende schriften. . . .”

48. *Ibid.*, I, 18, 7.

“no nation in the world has ever made such expeditions as have the nordic peoples, ever seeking the sun.”<sup>49</sup> Constantly surpassing themselves in their conquests, “they often uttered the following cry: OVER, OP, AN (over, on, toward)” which van Scrieck translated in the text as “Oultre,” “Plus oultre” (farther, farther still). Over hill and dale, crossing rivers, mountains, and valleys, their heroic cry (EUVER-OP, UBER-OP, OVER-OP which finally gives EUR-OP) “is henceforth known to all peoples under the name of Europe.” The meaning of the term is transparent and obvious: “Europe is a Belgian and virile name.”<sup>50</sup>

### III. THE INDO-EUROPEAN IDEA

In the company of Mylius (1612), Salmasius (1643), de Laet (1643), Boxhorn (1647), Stiernhielm (1671), Jäger (1686), and many others, van Scrieck set in motion a laboratory in which the scholars of the seventeenth century invented an original linguistic community for Europe.<sup>51</sup> Japheth was both the mythical patron and the conceptual tool, since it was he who, thanks to the confusion of Babel, permitted the conceptualizing of the history of a mother tongue which transformed itself over time into innumerable dialects. For those who attempted henceforth to compare and analyze them, to highlight their common structure, these idioms bear a family resemblance: they all bear the “Japhethic” stamp which, in its scarcely historicized version, received the name “Scythian”—a language close to old Iranian, but about which almost nothing else was then known. As for the Scythians, a barbarous people existing on the margins of civilized humanity, Herodotus only knew of them “by hearsay.”<sup>52</sup> The Scythians, Asiatic nomads who ignore the frontiers between Europe and Asia—two continents once entrusted to the “western” son of Noah—were also associated with the Caucasian provinces close to Mount Ararat, where the biblical Ark is supposed to have run aground.<sup>53</sup> Greek and Hebrew accounts thus converge toward

49. *Ibid.*, I, 38, 15: “Gheen Natien des Weerelts en hebben oyt ghedaen sulche Velt-tochten als de Noordersche volcken, altijt opclimmende naer de Sonne.”

50. *Ibid.*, I, 38, 15: “Europen is een Veldegen ende mannelicken naem.” For other semantic plays on the word “Europe” in van Gorp’s *Origins*, see book IX (*Venetica et Hyperborea*), 1045.

51. For general information, see D. Droixhe, *La Linguistique*, index. See also G. J. Metcalf, “The Indo European Hypothesis,” 223ff. (on Jäger), 244–245 (on Mylius), 245–246 (on Scrieckius), 246–248 (on De Laet), 248–249 (on Stiernhielm). For Boxhorn, see D. Droixhe, “Boxhorn’s Bad Reputation: A Chapter in Academic Linguistics,” in *Speculum. Historiographiae linguistica. Kurzbeiträge der IV. Internationalen Konferenz sur Gechichte der Sprachwissenschaften*, ed. K. D. Dutz (Münster, 1989), 359–384. For J. de Laet, see relevant sections of G. Gliozzi, *Adamo et il nuovo mondo. La nascita dell’antropologia come ideologia coloniale: dalla genealogie bibliche alle teorie razziali (1500–1700)* (Florence, 1976), 454–478 and index. Finally, D. Droixhe has shared with me his essay, which will appear as “De Laet, Grotius, les langues américaines et la tradition missionnaire.”

52. Herodotus, *Histoires* (Paris, 1945), IV, 16 for “the imaginary Scythians”; if one wants an answer to the question “where is Scythia?” see F. Hartog, *Le miroir d’Hérodote: Essai sur la représentation de l’autre* (Paris, 1980), esp. 48–51. For a summary of our current knowledge of Scythian linguistics, see A. Christol, *Des Scythes aux Ossètes* (Rouen, 1986).

53. Gen.8.4.

these mythical heights: was not one of the four sons of Japheth the Prometheus of the Caucasus?<sup>54</sup> And was not the latter's son named Deucalion, the "Greek Noah" saved from a flood<sup>55</sup> who, in the eyes of writers searching for a European linguistic community, belonged to the same ancient context as the Scythian legends?

Transformed into an artifact serving the purposes of an abstract prototype, "Scythian" therefore became, for several generations of scholars, a designation which grounded the hypothesis of a common source; this was the case not only for Greek and Latin as well as Germanic and Persian, but also, soon thereafter, for those Indian languages in which Becanus had already found traces of the "Indoscythians."<sup>56</sup>

Even as Joseph Justus Scaliger, in his *Diatriba de Europaerorum linguis*, vigorously opposed the Scythian hypothesis and therefore also opposed the idea of a single origin for all European languages,<sup>57</sup> everywhere in France, England, Spain, the Low Countries, Scandanavia, the regions which would later make up Italy and Germany, and elsewhere as well, the debates continued. Scholars tried both to evaluate the resemblances and differences among the European languages, and to determine the surviving elements of the original Hebrew in the post-Babel dialects. Thus, underlining the concordances between the idioms born of Scythian, Father Thomassin justified them by "reducing" all languages to Hebrew. In his *Méthode*, published in 1690, he wanted to demonstrate that the proximity between Hebrew and French is such that "one can truthfully say that they are fundamentally the same language."<sup>58</sup> In the article entitled "langue" in the *Encyclopédie*, Beauzée, who had read Thomassin carefully, followed his lead when he wrote in 1765: "The modern languages of Europe, which adopted analytic construction, remain much closer to the primitive language than did Greek or Latin. . . . Thus our modern language

54. Concerning the relations between the classical myth of Prometheus and the Caucasian legends of enchained giants, see G. Charachidzé, *Prométhée ou le Caucase. Essai de mythologie contrastive* (Paris, 1986).

55. For a version of Noah assimilated to Deucalion, see, for example, Philo of Alexandria, *De praemiis et poenis*, 23, ed. A. Beckaert (Paris, 1961), 53.

56. J. van Gorp, *Origines*, book IV (*De Indoscythica*), 449–457. On paradise situated in India, 482–483.

57. J. J. Scaliger, *Diatriba de Europaerorum linguis* (1599). Published posthumously in *Opuscula varia, antenac non edita* (Paris, 1610). Thus, for J. J. Scaliger, "the eleven mother languages" of Europe are "so distinct, that they have no affinities with one another"; if, then, for him "the dialects, . . . the branches of a mother language, have some affinity with one another," on the other hand, "between mother languages themselves, there is neither affinity nor correspondence." I am citing here the French edition of *Des langages des peuples de l'Europe*, published as an addition to E. Brerewood, *Recherches curieuses sur la diversité des langues et religions, en toutes les principales parties du monde* (Paris, 1640), 332–333, 336. This text reappears in Jean Lesnier's 1662 edition of the *Recherches curieuses* (Saumur, 1662).

58. Louis Thomassin, *La Méthode d'étudier et d'enseigner chrestiennement et utilement la Grammaire, ou les Langues par rapport à l'écriture sainte en les réduisant toutes à l'Hebreu* [1690] (Paris, 1693), 12. D. Droixhe, "Le comparatisme du P. Thomassin," to appear in *Florilegium Historiographiae Linguisticae*, ed. P. Swiggers and J. de Clercq (Louvain, forthcoming).

[French], as well as Spanish and English, are linked to Hebrew through Celtic."<sup>59</sup> If Beauzée can combine the new rigors of a history of languages with the timeless sacrality of Hebrew, if he can satisfy the demands of a comparativism attentive to the fact that "languages have common properties and differential characters"<sup>60</sup> while at the same time affirming the infallibility of Scripture, it is because for him "reason and revelation are, so to speak, two different canals through which the waters of a single source flow."<sup>61</sup>

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Leibniz cast a glance backward and forward over linguistic scholarship. Nothing escaped him: neither "the womb of the peoples"<sup>62</sup> of Europe in the *History of the Goths* of Cassidorus/Jordanès, nor those "strange etymologies"<sup>63</sup> which inspired in him the invention of the verb "*goropiser*," nor the recent hypotheses of Salmasius, Boxhorn, or Stiernhielm. He certainly subscribed to their Scythian theories. For how else could he understand the origins "of Latin and Greek, which share many common roots with the Germanic and Celtic languages," if not by formulating "the conjecture" of a "common origin of all these peoples descended from the Scythians. . . . For, all these languages of Scythia share many common roots with one another and with our [languages]."<sup>64</sup> Like his friend the semitic scholar Hiob Ludolf, Leibniz did not believe that Hebrew was the origin of all languages. Faced with the *lingua japhethica*, ancestor of European idioms, it was better to recognize another linguistic branch stemming from the same "common fund": "the Aramaic languages," which include Arabic, Chaldean, Syriac, Ethiopian, and Hebrew (which in Europe has become "a sort of dialect" like any other).<sup>65</sup>

When Leibniz, heir to a tradition more than one hundred years old, asserted the existence of a Jap(h)ethic entity<sup>66</sup> on the basis of a linguistically united Europe, he underlined the demonstrative value of an explanatory model of the linguistic affinities discernible in so many idioms separated by time and space. Speaking of the ancient "Scythians," he did not hesitate to recall that it is a question of a "generic term"<sup>67</sup> designating "these distant barbarians." Little matter: passion for the mother tongue, so often intertwined with that for the

59. *Encyclopédie* (s.v. Langue), XXV, 635–636. Thomassin is cited on p. 619. For the attribution of this article to Beauzée, see S. Auroux, *L'Encyclopédie: "Grammaire" et "Langue" au XVIIIème siècle* (Paris, 1973), 49–50, note 1.

60. *Encyclopédie*, 638.

61. *Ibid.*, 619.

62. G. W. Leibniz, *Brevis designatio meditationum de Originibus Gentium . . .*, in *Miscellanea Berolinensia ad incrementum scientiarum* (Berlin, 1710), 14: "gentium vagina."

63. G. W. Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais*, 243.

64. G. W. Leibniz, *Brevis*, 14 and *Nouveaux essais*, 238. Also see H. Aarsleff, "The Study and Use of Etymology in Leibniz," in H. Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London, 1982), 84–100.

65. G. W. Leibniz, *Brevis*, 4. For H. Ludolf, see A. Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel*, III, 2, 1475–1479.

66. In the *Brevis*, Leibniz writes *Japeticae* and *Japeticum* to designate that which the "northern" languages have in common. He restores, however, these "septentrional" idioms to *Japhetum* (p.4), associated in the same paragraph, it is true, with *Japetum* and his son, Prometheus, both of whom "the mythologists situated" close to the Caucasus (*ad Caucasum*).

67. Leibniz, *Brevis*, 8: "Barbari illi remontiores . . . generali vocabulo."

nation, incited even Leibniz—who was otherwise quite cosmopolitan in outlook—to equate in 1697 “the origin of the peoples and the languages of Europe” with “the archaic German language.”<sup>68</sup>

Beginning with the sixteenth century, more and more systematic comparisons between Germanic and Persian terms, and the rapprochements of the languages of India, Greek, and Latin, developed in the wake of the spice trade and the proselytizing efforts of the Jesuits.<sup>69</sup> One of them, produced by Father Gaston Coeurdoux in investigating the structural correspondences between Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, proposed a Japhethic solution which henceforth brought together Europe and a new East. In a memoir written in 1767, known to the members of the *Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* but not published until 1808, Coeurdoux wrote:

Japheth, eldest son of Noah, left the plain of Shinar,<sup>70</sup> bringing with him a third of humanity, and headed toward the West, which was his share. His seven children no doubt became the heads of as many great families, each one of which must have spoken one of the new original languages, such as Latin, Greek, Slavonic, etc. May I be permitted to add to these Sanskrit (*samskroutam*); it is as deserving as any other language, given its extensive reach, to be numbered among the primitive languages. The supposition that I am making will perhaps later become a reality.<sup>71</sup>

68. Leibniz, *Unvorgreifliche Gedanken, betreffend die Ausübung und Verbesserung der teutschen Sprache* (1698), in *Deutsche Schriften*, ed. G. E. Guhrauer, (Berlin, 1838), I, 465, note 46: “Stecket also im Teutschen Alterthum und sonderlich in der Teutschen uralten Sprache, so über das Alter aller Griechischen und Lateinischen Bücher hinauf steigt, der Ursprung der Europäischen Völker und Sprachen, auch zum Theil des uralten Gottesdienstes, der Sitten, Rechte des Adels . . .” In the same text Leibniz insists in various ways on this precedence of “the German language,” the study of which “will enlighten all of Europe,” 464, note 42. For the general historical and intellectual contexts, see W. W. Chambers, “Language and Nationality in German Preromantic and Romantic Thought,” *Modern Language Review* 41 (1946), 382–392 (for Leibniz, 382–383).

69. Undoubtedly one of the oldest testimonies known is the letter of the Jesuit Thomas Stephens, signed at Goa on October 24, 1583, destined for his brother Richard. The document is conserved in the manuscript section of the *Bibliothèque Royale* in Brussels (3353–3361, 61–63, three folios, recto verso): “Linguae harum regionum sunt permultae. Pronuntiationem habent non inuestumam, et compositionem latinae graecaeque similem; phrasae et constructiones plane mirabiles, Literae syllabarum vim habent, quae toties variantur, quoties consonantes vocalibus, vel mutae cum liquidis combinari possunt” (on the verso of folio 63). For a presentation of this document and bibliography, see G Schurhammer, “Der Marathidichter Thomas Stephens S.I.,” *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu* 26 (1957), 67–82. This letter, together with other documents, is mentioned by J. -C. Muller, “Quelques repères pour l’histoire de la notion de vocabulaire de base dans le précomparatisme,” *Histoire, épistémologie, langage* 6 (1984), 38ff. For Germano-Persian comparative work, see W. Streitberg, “Zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft,” *Indogermanische Forschungen* 35 (1915), 182–196; D. Droixhe, *Linguistique et l’appel*, 76ff. For the letter of May 18, 1584, where Fr. Raphelengius indicates to Justus Lipsius some examples of the affinity of Germanic and Persian terms, see M. A. Nauwelaerts, *Iusti Lipsi Epistolae* (Brussels, 1983), II, 121–123, note 349. For general information, see W. Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, N.Y., 1988). For the more specifically philosophical aspects, see R. P. Droit, *L’oubli de l’Inde: Une amnésie philosophique* (Paris, 1992).

70. The valley where the confusion of Babel takes place in Genesis (11.2).

71. *Mémoires de Littérature, tirés des registres de l’Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (Paris, 1808), XLIX, 664. For Père Coeurdoux, see S. Murr, “Les conditions d’émergence du discours sur l’Inde au Siècle des Lumières,” *Purusrtha* 7 (1983), 233–284; see also his thesis, *L’Inde philosophique entre Bousset et Voltaire*, esp. vol 2., *L’indologie du Père Coeurdoux: Stratégies, apologetique et scientifique* (Paris, 1987).

Historiography has willingly recognized the scientificity of this “supposition,” this “reality,” calling it “the Indo-European hypothesis” ever since William Jones on February 2, 1786 marvelled at the linguistic kinship between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin. This affinity is such, wrote Jones, “that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.”<sup>72</sup>

#### IV. FROM “THE (INDO-)EUROPEAN RACE” TO THE “ARYAN” MYTH

“Indo-European,” often considered very close to, or even identified, with the sacred language of India (Sanskrit), took over the role played by the Scythian hypothesis for *érudits* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the means of explaining the origins and transformations of European languages.<sup>73</sup> As the Iranist James Darmesteter wrote in 1890, speaking for “the scientific orthodoxy of Europe,” the Vedas was the text thanks to which we can reach “the first revelation of religious thought to the Indo-European race. The Vedas thereby performed the function of a sacred book which describes the religious origins of the race, the Aryan Bible.”<sup>74</sup>

From Jones to Dumézil, by way of Bopp and Saussure, there was no shortage of “founding fathers” to insist on the “algebraic” character of the word “Indo-European,” which they used as a heuristic term rather than to refer to the chosen language of some ancestor of Europe. On this point, Dumézil, in his *Leçon inaugurale* given at the *Collège de France* on December 1, 1949, reminded his audience that linguists and other specialists in Indo-European issues “know” — but perhaps it would have been more judicious to say “should know” — “that the living, dramatic reconstruction of what the language or civilization of the

72. W. Jones, “On the Hindus. The Third Discourse,” in *Asiatic Researches* I [1788] (1799), 423. French translation in “Troisième Discours anniversaire,” *Recherches asiatiques ou Mémoires de la Société établie au Bengale*, transl. A. Labaume, with notes by Langlès, Cuvier, Delambre, Lamarck, and Olivier (Paris, 1805), I, 508–509. For context and bibliography, see Olender, *Languages*, 6–7. 31; G. Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990).

73. An especially explicit formulation of the Scythian hypothesis is found in 1654, in the preface, signed by Georgius Hornius, of the posthumous publication of Boxhorn’s *Originum Gallicarum*, on the first page of his address *ad lectorem*: Vidit [he means Boxhorn] innumera vocabula, Germanis, Latinis, Graecis et aliis per Europam nationibus, communia esse. Inde conjiciebat a communi fonte eam similitudinem profectam, id est eadem omnium illarum gentium origine . . . Quare alia via rem aggressus, communem quandam linguam, quam scythicam vocabat, matrem graecae, latinae, germanicae et persicae statuit, ex qua illae velut dialecti, prosiciscantur. See G. Bonfante, “Ideas on the Kinship of European languages from 1200 to 1800,” *Cahiers d’histoire mondiale* 1 (January, 1954), 691, who translates and comments this passage, as does D. Droixhe, *La linguistique et l’appel*, 97. For Boxhorn, see above, note 38. In his “*Discours sur l’étude philosophique des langues*,” read at the *Académie Française*, the first Tuesday of December, 1819 (Paris, 1820), Volney speaks for his time by saying, “For one hundred years, the language of this Scythian nation, discovered by our European scholars in the sacred books of India under the name of Sanscrit, is more and more recognized to be the basis, not only of an infinity of words, but of the grammatical systems of a multitude of ancient and modern languages,” Volney, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1821), I, 424.

74. J. Darmesteter, “Rapport annuel,” *Journal Asiatique* (July-August, 1890), 25.

common ancestors had been like is impossible, since nothing can replace documentary evidence, and there are no documents.”<sup>75</sup> However, though they have been reiterated for more than two centuries—if one takes into consideration the nuanced formulation of Jones’s phrase—these calls to elementary historical rigor have not prevented archaeologists and linguists devoted to the Indo-European cause from searching, sometimes frantically, for the “Aryan” origins of Europe. Despite these longings to discover religious, linguistic, racial, and political principles for a Western civilization finally liberated from all Hebraic heritage (as when Renan states that “There is nothing Jewish about Jesus”<sup>76</sup>), this nostalgic search for [Aryan] origins was nonetheless inspired by a biblical paradigm and the fascination long exercised by Hebrew, Adam’s language. This point was not missed by the eminent Indologist Sylvain Levi who, at the beginning of this century, observed how much the “old biblical prejudices,” still intact, continued to exert influence on theories relating to “the childhood of Aryan languages,” or “the primitive Aryan.”<sup>77</sup>

“The Aryan myth,” in its strictly academic phase, was therefore able in the Christian West of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to result in a twin development, paradoxical but not necessarily contradictory. The modern scholars whose opinions we have surveyed represented the culmination of a historiographical effort aiming to discover for itself splendid ancestors in an East purged of all semitism; they favored the idea of a West superior to all other civilizations, but were nonetheless able to identify themselves with the actors of a providential history whose rules were decreed, once and for all, by biblical revelation.<sup>78</sup>

But the history of the twentieth century is marked by the searing memory of another use of the “Aryan myth,”<sup>79</sup> when the words “Aryan” and “Semite” could, during the Nazi occupation of Europe, be made to correspond to “juridical” categories ordaining the death or the right to life of millions of Europeans

75. G. Dumézil, *Leçon inaugurale à la chaire de civilisation indo-européenne du Collège de France*, December 1, 1949 (Paris, 1950), 6–7. See the warnings of Bopp and Saussure cited in M. Olender, *Languages*, 13–16. On the positions of A. Momigliano and C. Ginzburg, as well as the reply of Dumézil, see the notes in M. Olender, “Georges Dumézil et les usages ‘politiques’ de la préhistoire indo-Européenne,” in *Les Grecs, les Romains et nous. L’antiquité est-elle moderne?*, ed. R. P. Droit (Paris, 1991); D. Eribon, *Faut-il brûler Dumézil? Mythologie, science et politique* (Paris, 1992). For a response to this article in the form of a supplementary analysis by C. Ginzburg and a reply by D. Eribon, see *Le Monde des débats* (September and October, 1993). See also C. Malamoud, “Introduction,” *Histoire des religions et comparatisme: la question indo-européenne, Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 208 (April–June 1991), as well as the rest of the issue.

76. In the second of four manuscript notebooks of Renan in the Bibliothèque nationale, see *Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises* 11. 484. See P. Alfaric, *Les manuscrits de la “Vie de Jésus” d’Ernest Renan* (Paris, 1939), 26. For other such references to Renan as “between the Aryan and the Semite,” see my chapter 4 on the subject in *Languages*, 51ff.

77. S. Lévi, *La Grande Encyclopédie* (1885–1902), IV, 46, “Aryens II, Linguistique.” For text and context, see Olender, *Languages*, 138–139.

78. For the insistence on this providential vision of history in Indo-European studies of the last century, see, for example, my chapter 6 on Adolphe Pictet, *Languages*, 93ff.

79. See the classic L. Poliakov, *Le Mythe aryen: Essai sur les sources du racisme et des nationalismes* (Paris, 1971). Similarly, for an examination which covers other texts and contexts, from Pico della Mirandola to Gobineau, see G. Gliozzi, *Le teorie della razza nell’età moderna* (Torino, 1986).

according to whether one classified them under one or the other “rubric.” The programmed death of Jews and Gypsies — who speak, after all, a language very closely resembling Sanskrit! — could thus be “legitimized” by discourses inspired by old racist theories taken from the writings of specialists in Indo-European studies.

But despite this terrible use of the concept “Aryan” and the notion of an Indo-European origin to European language and thought, even today, at this *fin-de-siècle* in Europe as in the United States, certain writers — linguists, mythologists, prehistorians, archaeologists and anthropologists, university professors or journalists, pursue this type of speculation.<sup>80</sup> From the old “Aryan myth,” devoted to the romantic quest for a paradise lost, a programmatic vision of the future of the West can be derived. Exalting reason, the scientific spirit, and the technical know-how that resulted from them, Michel Poniatowski attributes the intellectual talents and the ontological and genetic characteristics which trigger the great excursions of the human mind solely to the Indo-Europeans. In a work entitled *L’Avenir n’est écrit nulle part*, he wrote in 1978 concerning the Indo-Europeans:

Yet it is there that we find our true sources, common to all of Europe. There our primitive culture lies. These men, who directly preceded us, are, through us, at the origin of the most advanced civilizations and sciences, of the most refined art and culture. The spirit of invention, of creation, led them, over the course of 4,500 years, by a long, progressive march, from the shores of the Baltic to the moon.<sup>81</sup>

We also learn here that “linguistic studies have brought to the fore the fact that the languages of the Indo-Europeans served as an incomparable tool, perfectly adapted to abstract reasoning and to the development of the sciences.”<sup>82</sup> In these same pages, finally, Poniatowski did not hesitate to clarify his own remarks, which, like the title of the work, scramble the time and space of the historian by transforming the “Indo-European people” into the “white race”!<sup>83</sup>

Like Michel Poniatowsky, Professor Jean Haudry thinks that what distinguishes the Indo-Europeans is their capacity to organize political life.<sup>84</sup> If, regarding those prehistoric times for which Dumézil reminded us “there are no documents,”<sup>85</sup> Haudry concedes that “it is difficult to trace a moral portrait of the Indo-Europeans, that is, to determine the constants of their character,” he nevertheless proposes a tableau of the “Indo-European people” and of its

80. Information relative to the current French context (1972–1991) is in Olender, “Georges Dumézil” (see note 75, 191–228). For supplementary information, see my “Usages ‘politiques’ de la préhistoire indo-européenne,” in *Racisme et modernité*, ed. M. Wieviorka (Paris, 1993), 85–97.

81. Michel Poniatowsky, *L’Avenir n’est écrit nulle part* (Paris, 1979), 149.

82. *Ibid.*, 153.

83. *Ibid.*, 149–150.

84. Jean Haudry, *Les Indo-Européens* (“*Que sais-je?*” collection, no. 1965) (Paris, 1981), 11. B. Sergent reviewed this book in *Annales E. S. C.* 37 (1982), 669–681: “this absurd chronicle . . . which sets us back forty years.” See my summary in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* (April/June, 1983), 163–167, and further analysis in Olender, “Georges Dumézil,” 208–213.

85. See note 75 above.

“destiny” which leads it “to action, to effort, to the surpassing of self.”<sup>86</sup> Just as rhetorically, he both denies and affirms the legitimacy of the use of the notion of “race” when he wrote: “if the expression ‘the Indo-European race’ is improper, it is on the other hand legitimate to try to determine the physical types represented by the locutors.”<sup>87</sup> Seven lines further, in the same “*Que sais-je?*” on the Indo-Europeans, he wrote: “For these testimonies agree in designating the Nordic race, if not as the whole people, at least as its superior stratum.” In this same context, after having cited Tacitus’s famous *Germania*, the author refers to the writings of H. F. K. Günther, one of the official racial scientists of the Third Reich and the so-called “Founder of German Racial Thought.”<sup>88</sup> Haudry, of whom it is appropriate to recall that he is a member of the “*Conseil scientifique du Front Nationale*” founded in 1989 to “enlighten its president, Jean-Marie Le Pen,” had already endeavored to show in 1979—against all linguistic evidence—in another work entitled *Indo-European* that “the (Indo-European) vocabulary of commerce is almost non-existent, which is natural given the poor development of this activity among the Indo-Europeans.”<sup>89</sup> Thus formulated, this assertion that commercial vocations are reserved “by nature” for certain peoples, is based upon an ethnic presupposition rather than a scientific or historical “cause.” The goal of this maneuver is without doubt to distance these illustrious ancestors from all commercial practice which might sully their civilization and, thus, to preserve intact the image of Europe in the Golden Age.

A corollary to the search for an Aryan paradise is the attribution to the Indo-Europeans and to those whom one has chosen to consider as their descendants of a monopoly on resources necessary for progress (such as “abstraction,” “metaphysics,” “reflection,” “science,” “technique,” and “politics,”<sup>90</sup>) and of all that the mastery of these practices supposes in planetary (and even *inter-planetary*) superiority for those who have exclusive use of them. Such an attribution was made already in the nineteenth century.

The young Ferdinand de Saussure made no mistake in writing, in 1878: “there is certainly, at the root of research on the Aryans, in descriptions of this people of the golden age, revised and embellished by the imagination, the almost conscious dream of an ideal humanity.”<sup>91</sup> More than a century after the writing

86. Jean Haudry, *Les Indo-Européens*, 8, 40, 68.

87. *Ibid.*, 122.

88. The distinguished title, “Begründer des deutschen Rassegedankens” is found on the page presenting his works, for example, at the end of the volume, in H. F. K. Günther, *Die nordische Rasse bei den indogermanen Asiens* (Munich, 1934), cited in Jean Haudry, *L’Indo-Européen*, 124, note 40.

89. Jean Haudry, *L’Indo-européen* (“*Que sais-je?*” collection, no. 1798) (Paris, 1979), 120. See the review by J.-L. Perpillou in *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris*, vol. 76, fasc. 2 (1981), 113–114, which I cite at length in my article “Georges Dumézil,” 212–213.

90. For illustrations and references for the nineteenth century, see M. Olender, *Languages*, 65, note 27; for general information, see the chapters of the same work on Renan and Pictet. For contemporary examples, see M. Olender, “Georges Dumézil,” 206ff.

91. F. de Saussure, *Journal de Genève* (17 April, 1878), 3, col. 1, recalling the work of his first master, A. Pictet.

of this sentence, such “research” follows its uninterrupted course. Certain Aryanophiles of today add to it the denial of the existence of the gas chambers and the kind of death suffered in the Nazi extermination camps.

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