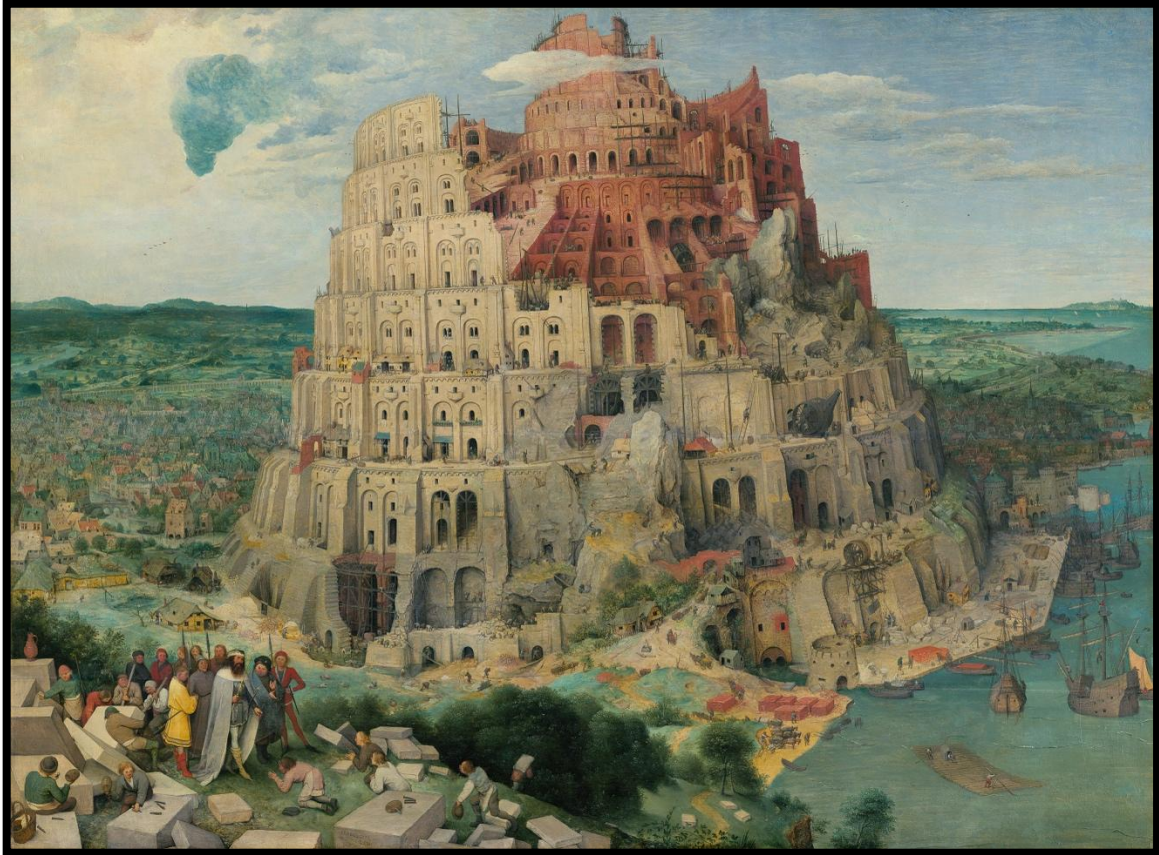


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## #8 – CONVERSATIONS

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*The Tower of Babel* (1563)<sup>1</sup> by Pieter Bruegel I, the Elder (1526/30-1569)<sup>2</sup> held in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

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<sup>1</sup> To zoom in on this painting see:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter\\_Bruegel\\_d.\\_Ä.,\\_Kunsthistorisches\\_Museum\\_Wien,\\_Gemäldegalerie\\_-\\_Turmbau\\_zu\\_Babel\\_-\\_GG\\_1026\\_-\\_Kunsthistorisches\\_Museum.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_d._Ä.,_Kunsthistorisches_Museum_Wien,_Gemäldegalerie_-_Turmbau_zu_Babel_-_GG_1026_-_Kunsthistorisches_Museum.jpg).

<sup>2</sup> *Grove Art Online* (Oxford) at **Bruegel, Pieter I - the Elder** (born, 1525/30; died, Brussels, 1569) by Wied & Porras - Pieter Bruegel was a painter and draftsman operating in the Netherlands and is one of the foundational figures for the Northern Renaissance. Although heir to the early Netherlandish painters, particularly Hieronymous Bosch, Bruegel brought a new humanizing spirit and breadth of vision to the

## THE PAINTING

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**Genesis 11 (NJB):** <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they cannot understand one another.' <sup>8</sup> Yahweh scattered them thence all over the world, and they stopped building the city.\* <sup>9</sup> That is why it was called Babel, since there Yahweh confused<sup>d</sup> the language of the whole world, and from there Yahweh scattered them all over the world. <sup>3</sup>

Let us look at the painting.

First, the painting is a *curiosity*. What do we mean by this English word whose roots are in the Latin adjective *cūriōsus* (from the Latin noun *cūra* -*ae*, feminine noun meaning a person of "care, solicitude, carefulness, taking pains"). One meaning of "curious" in English we could use to describe our painter

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**curious**" - **I.1.a. - c1386–1779** - Bestowing care or pains; careful; studious, attentive. *Obsolete*.

Just click on the *Wikimedia* link given in footnote #1, which then allows you to zoom in on the painting, allowing you to study closely what Pieter Bruegel has packed into it. So many "curiosities" - his unusual and minute attentiveness to so many details - animals, men and women, machines, clothing (even the tiniest people are clothed in specific styles and colors), tools, carts, tackle, boats and ships, winches, ladders, scaffolding, architecture, fortified towns, and techniques of stonework and construction. Take the

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traditional subjects he depicted while creating many new ones. His style and subject matter were adopted but rarely surpassed by the many artists of the later 16th century and the 17th who were influenced by his work, especially the landscape and genre artists of the northern provinces of the Netherlands. ... *The Tower of Babel* (Vienna, Ksthist. Mus.), the undated variant of which (Rotterdam, Mus. Boymans-van Beuningen) is usually thought to have been painted c. 1567–1568. ... Bruegel's eerie architectural Utopia is modeled on the ruins of the Colosseum in Rome, which he must have studied while in Italy. He conceived the vision of a Roman monstrosity, the fearful scale of which far exceeded all architectural megalomaniacs of the past. *The Tower of Babylon*, described in the Bible and by Josephus Flavius, symbolizes the fact that all the works of mankind are doomed to imperfection. According to Demus, the tower could not be completed because the hubristic design of its builders had reached the limits of possibility. Bruegel's intent is to make evident this frustration: the scene typifies "a glaring want of coordination," "a muddled conception doomed from the outset," "an absurd state of helplessness before the grandiose mockery of a nightmarish bankruptcy of reason."

\* Is 14:12seq.; Jr 51:53; Jn 10:16; 11:52 • Col 3:11

<sup>3</sup> [\*The New Jerusalem Bible\*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ge 11:7–9.

time to take a look and see how this artist has “taken pains, is careful, is studious, and attentive.” One could get lost in the details and for a time enjoy it - “Oh, look at that! I had not noticed that.”

Second, one begins to wonder whether the adjective *obscene* might be appropriate to describe this massive human construction, which rises over the created world, looming (and leaning) as something bloated, engorged, a kind of swollen blister made of stone – notice the painter’s use of red suggesting that the building suffers a noxious<sup>4</sup> infection.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**obscene**” – **1. – 1571** – Offensively or grossly indecent; **2. – 1597** – Offending against moral principles, repugnant; repulsive, foul, loathsome. Now (also): *spec.* (of a price, sum of money, etc.) ridiculously or offensively high.

What is the cause of this inflammation? We have our clue in how this tower of Babel reduces the relative size of the humans, who are giving their lives and efforts to build it, to that of ants. *The proportion is completely out of proportion*: buildings to humans, and humans to this work of their hands, and from a biblical perspective, a building out of all proportion to the natural world, which is God’s good work. And in this way, another meaning of “obscene” comes into play: “ill-omened, inauspicious.”

**Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), “The City in the Sea”<sup>5</sup> –**

Lo! Death has reared himself a throne  
In a strange city lying alone  
Far down within the dim West,  
Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best  
Have gone to their eternal rest.  
There shrines and palaces and towers  
(Time-eaten towers and tremble not!)  
Resemble nothing that is ours.  
Around, by lifting winds forgot,  
Resignedly beneath the sky  
The melancholy waters lie.  
...

So blend the turrets and shadows there  
That all seem pendulous in air,

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<sup>4</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**noxious**” – **1. – a1500** – Harmful, poisonous, injurious; unwholesome.

<sup>5</sup> For the whole poem go to: <https://poets.org/poem/city-sea>.

**While from a proud tower in the town  
Death looks gigantically down.**

And notice how the nattily dressed *pezzi grossi* ("big pieces", a way Italians have of referring to the economically and therefore socially privileged minority) gathered in the foreground of the painting are *outsized* in relation to all the other humans in the painting. These (self-) important people likely live in the fortified castle that we see tucked over there to the right, the next largest building in the painting, pleasantly situated along the shore where cooling breezes blow. But not even that is enough for them. And so, they require next door a monstrosity of a tower to be built.

*Enough is never enough* - perhaps this best describes the infection of which the tower is the indication.

Third, there is no way that a tower so aggressively ugly could be built unless there was **one language** being deployed, which everyone understood, and through the use of which they were compelled to build it. That language is the language of *power*, the one language, I believe, to which this biblical text from Genesis 11 is referring:

**Genesis 11 (NJB):** <sup>5</sup> Now Yahweh came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built. <sup>6</sup> 'So, they are all a single people with a **single language!**' said Yahweh.<sup>6</sup>

Think of how a nation – take your pick - filled with people who speak different languages can be forced to comply, to obey, by a few who deploy an open, naked power, or who may prefer the use of a more hidden, devious power. Everyone recognizes when that language is in play, unmistakable and in unholy company with its master Fear.

**George Orwell from his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published June 1949 -** here O'Brien instructs Winston – "Now I will tell you the answer to my question. It is this. The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. ... The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of

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<sup>6</sup> [\*The New Jerusalem Bible\*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ge 11:5-6.

relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?" [Orwell, George. 1984 (pp. 288-289). Kindle Edition.]

Strangely, the truth of this kind of power – this “one language” – is that its taproot draws up from below the dark poison of fear, which is its Master. At the core of such power is cowardice,<sup>7</sup> which is why it is also vicious.

This explains why God became so alert to what He saw happening in Babylon, not liking it at all. God could care less about towers and what they were for. But God most certainly cared about the abuse of power and the use of fear to intimidate a free people into subservience to a few. God’s action in Genesis 11 was not a punishment; it was the effective undermining of the “one language” of power and of those few whose interests it served. God did not punish at Babel; God gave people back their own voices (languages) and then commanded them to leave Babylon and to begin to learn how to fight for their own voices, becoming responsible for their own growth, earning the right to speak by engaging the world and building it, and to quit wasting their lives helping others build ugliness.

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## TEXT (KNOX & OAKLEY)

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### 10. ABOUT USELESS GOSSIPING

1. Keep clear, as best you may, from the babel of human voices; it is wonderful what distraction is to be found in the discussion of worldly affairs, even when the motive for it is perfectly innocent. Frivolity is infectious and makes easy prisoners of us. I wish I had kept silence, this many a time, instead of enjoying the society of my fellow men!

What is it that makes us so fond of talking, of gossiping with our friends? We hardly ever come away from it without a guilty conscience. What makes talkers of us, is that we find relaxation, on both sides, in the mere bandying of words; we want an escape from the tedious whirligig of our thoughts. We like giving expression to what is in our

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<sup>7</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**coward**” – 1. - ?a1289 – A reproachful designation for one who displays ignoble fear or want of courage in the face of danger, pain, or difficulty; an ignobly faint-hearted or pusillanimous person.



minds, especially about the good things we enjoy, or would like to enjoy, and the difficulties we find in our way.

2. And the pity of it is that usually it does no good at all; we may get comfort from finding an outlet like that, but it interferes, more than a little, with that inward comfort which is the gift of God.

We need more watchfulness, more prayer; our time mustn't be frittered away in doing nothing. When you have leave and leisure for talking, let your talk be such as makes for spiritual profit. Victims as we are of bad habit, unambitious as we are about our souls' progress, we speak so unguardedly! And yet there is talk which can be a great spiritual help to us – I mean, the earnest exchange of ideas about spiritual things; especially when two souls, well matched in temper and disposition, find themselves drawn together in God.<sup>8</sup>

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## CONVERSATION

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### Point One

Our author writes: "Keep clear, as best you may, from the babel of human voices."

I have been around newborns and little children recently, which always causes me to feel that I need to be especially attentive to what these little ones "fresh from God" (the lovely expression of a dear friend of mine) are expressing with their pre-linguistic selves. They are the purest place that I know for exploring the birth of language. I ask myself, "What is language, and what is it for?" I wonder how with our power of language as grown-ups, we so often cannot establish a depth of relationship with each other the way that pre-linguistic little ones can with us. How do they do this?

The author of the *Imitation* is addressing language in this chapter, instructing about its proper use and its misuse. "What is it that makes us so fond of talking, of gossiping with our friends?" He recognizes how we can drown ourselves in chatter – "the babel of human voices". We can take the extraordinary power of language - so capable of expressing our inner lives outwardly – and reduce it to noise - "Frivolity is infectious and makes easy prisoners of us." We babble at each other, a persistent drone, a "wall of

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<sup>8</sup> Kempis, Thomas à. *The Imitation of Christ*: Translated by Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley (pp. 34-35). Kindle Edition.

sound” that we deploy to protect us from SILENCE, which we Americans fear almost as much as Death.

**From Rumi, “The City of Saba” -**

Sit quietly and listen for a voice  
that will say, *Be more silent.*  
As that happens, your soul starts to revive.<sup>9</sup>

Hell, I fear, is filled with “idle chatter”, or as the original Latin title of this chapter has it – *De superfluitate verborum*; i.e., “On a superfluity of words”:

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective “**superfluous**” – **1.a.** - **a1450** – That is present in a greater quantity than is desired, permitted, or required for the purpose; abundant or numerous to the point of excess; more than sufficient. **2.a.** - **c1450** – That is not needed or required; unnecessary, redundant; uncalled for; (sometimes) *specifically*, not essential, trivial.

It is for this reason that I am convinced that the most striking thing about Hell is how noisy it is, where no one ever shuts up – “the mere bandying of words”, where silence never is – “people talking without speaking; people hearing without listening; people writing songs that voices never shared” as Paul Simon put it. Hell is where no one knows what language is for; they just have it. And, by contrast, I am convinced that Heaven is the home of Silence, where every word counts (and therefore one needs so few of them), and where language has measure and proportion and elegance – “In the beginning was the Word: The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)

**Point Two**

Our author writes: “What distraction is to be found in the discussion of worldly affairs, even when the motive for it is perfectly innocent.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**innocent**” – **3.a.** - **a1382** – Having or showing the simplicity, ignorance, artlessness, or unsuspecting nature of a child or one ignorant of the world; devoid of cunning or artifice; simple, guileless, unsuspecting; hence, artless, naive, ingenuous.

Innocence is a tricky concept, and especially when “innocence” gets mixed up with “purity”.

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<sup>9</sup> Barks, Coleman. *A Year with Rumi: Daily Readings* (p. 219). Kindle Edition.

On the one hand, these two ideas *do* belong together when we are referring to a very young human being. Because little ones are so ignorant of, still so untouched by, the world and its distortions, their *innocence* is “guileless, devoid of cunning, unsuspecting, and naïve” We adults can look on the innocence of a little one and be touched by it, amazed and moved by it. But we also know that the world will come for them, and they will be hurt by it. We pray that they will become wiser and stronger in the fray. But at this time in their young lives, their innocence is, if we may put it this way, *clueless*, and their purity is not *something chosen, fought for*, but something given them because of the protected environment in which they live.

On the other hand, these two ideas also belong together when we are referring to a genuinely holy person, one who is long in the experience of the spiritual path. We refer to a person who is mature and tested and able to accept the challenge of depth in his or her life. This is what Jesus was driving at when he said in Matthew 10:

16 Look, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves; so be cunning as snakes and yet innocent as doves. <sup>10</sup>

In this case, innocence does not mean “clueless”, because a true grownup is far from being clueless. He or she is all too aware of the world’s distortions, even when “innocently” seeking to stay up to date with the daily news – “the discussion of worldly affairs” and liking to chit-chat with others about our worries and fears and concerns and convictions. What “innocence” in this case means is *what happens to a person who seeks to imitate Christ*. His or her innocence is his or her *likeness to Christ*, a person who effectively and consistently “does as Jesus would do” in this or that circumstance.

And in this case, the “purity” of such mature and tested people has nothing to do with them “staying clean” or “unstained” by their engagement with the world. All we need do to understand purity is to contemplate Christ in His passion and brutal murder. In order to save us, the Christ “got dirty”, went in and moved close up to even the most “impure” places and people, so that He might bring divine love there. In this sense, “purity” means something much closer to what Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) meant when he wrote: “Purity of heart means to will one thing.” And it is also what St. Paul perceived so well about the Way of Jesus Christ, describing for us what God means by a person who has become “pure”, through long effort and a large measure of divine grace:

**Philippians 2 (NJB):** <sup>1</sup> So if in Christ there is anything that will move you, any incentive in love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any warmth or sympathy – I

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<sup>10</sup> [\*The New Jerusalem Bible\*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 10:16.



appeal to you, <sup>2</sup> **make my joy complete by being of a single mind**, one in love, one in heart and one in mind. <sup>3</sup> Nothing is to be done out of jealousy or vanity; instead, out of humility of mind everyone should give preference to others, <sup>4</sup> everyone pursuing not selfish interests but those of others. <sup>5</sup> Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus. <sup>11</sup>

### Point Three

Our author writes: “When you have leave and leisure for talking, let your talk be such as makes for spiritual profit.”

The goal we seek in our imitation of Christ is not about us always talking spiritually to people. This is artless and quickly becomes tiresome to those having to listen to us. No, what Jesus knew was that his Father was at work within anyone he met in his earthly ministry.

**John 5 (NJB):** <sup>17</sup> His answer to them was, ‘My Father still goes on working, and I am at work, too.’<sup>12</sup>

There is little doubt that Jesus was a master of what we call “small talk” (this is nothing like “idle talk” or frivolous chit-chat) – an artful use of language to make open the possibility of a real connection between persons. We see Jesus, over and over again, engaging people who had no idea who he was, or who had assumed that he would have little interest in knowing them. Jesus had to have been good at *using language artfully*, and with humor, causing people to trust Him and to open their faces to Him:

### Psalm 34 (NJB):

<sup>5</sup> Fix your gaze on Yahweh and your face will grow bright, you will never hang your head in shame. <sup>13</sup>

So, what could be the meaning of “let your talk be such as makes for spiritual profit.” It means primarily *a way of paying attention to people*, a way to listening to them with a deliberate and heartfelt desire to find the Holy Spirit at work in them.

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<sup>11</sup> [\*The New Jerusalem Bible\*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Php 2:1-5.

<sup>12</sup> [\*The New Jerusalem Bible\*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 5:17.

<sup>13</sup> [\*The New Jerusalem Bible\*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ps 34:5.

We go to meet them there, where God and that soul meet. To imitate Christ in the proper use of language means far less about communicating spiritual words or knowledge; it is far more about sharing with a person a mutual experience, a “spiritual” experience, of God at work *within us both*.