The Labours of Translation: Towards Utopia in Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*

Vytas Narusevicius

An analysis of the two remaining paintings of the Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525 – 1569) suggests that the notion of translation and labour can speak in both a utopian spirit of social critique and to a resistance of authority. The paintings appear to embody an anticipation of a multiplicity of tongues in the same way that theorist Louis Marin describes Thomas More's *Utopia* as having an "anticipating, but blind, judgement." [1] More's Utopia and Bruegel's *Towers* are not conventional representations of a realized vision, but can be understood as a process where a utopian ideal has yet to be discovered. The utopian discourse that is present in the works of Bruegel and More allowed a modernizing sixteenth-century society to represent itself critically to itself. It became useful to its audience by enabling a kind of problem solving capacity to think through the emerging social, political and cultural changes. Bruegel's paintings are clearly translating a biblical story into a 'speaking picture' by depicting a ziggurat-like tower reaching towards the heavens, yet at the same time they appear to be doing something more by recreating an event, albeit a mythical event, and its consequences. Many sources have come together to inform Bruegel's original paintings, yet there are many contradictions depicted within them and, not surprisingly, there are many translations or interpretations. I argue that within this multiplicity of tongues and labours of translation there is a kind of bewildering individual freedom that can be said to have risen out the ruins of Babel. Bruegel's representation of the contrast between the floundering hubris of a King and the industriousness of his subjects involves translating or re-authoring the original story, which also implies a challenging of the authority of the original and the subsequent importance of both the process of translation and self-narration for any kind of social transformation.

Bruegel produced three paintings of the Tower of Babel between 1553 and 1568. The earliest was a miniature painted on ivory while he was working in Giulio Clovio's studio in Rome around 1553 and is now lost. The second *Tower of Babel* is a large (114 x 155 cm) panel painting now housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, and signed and dated by the artist in 1563. Generally thought to

have been commissioned by the financier Nichalaes Jonghlick, the Vienna painting later found its way into the possession of Emperor Rudolph II. The smaller (59.9 x 74.6 cm) third *Tower of Babel* was possibly also purchased by the Emperor; it is neither signed nor dated, but has been attributed to various dates between 1563 and 1568.[2] It is currently in the Museum Boymans Van Beuningen Rotterdam.

The Genesis narrative of the Tower of Babel is typically seen as the source for Bruegel's paintings. Nimrod, the leader of the Shem, settled his people in the land of Shinar and Genesis 11:1 – 4 states that: "Throughout the earth men spoke the same language, with the same vocabulary … they said to one another, 'let us build ourselves a town and a tower with its top reaching heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves, so that we may not be scattered about the whole earth.'"[3] God recognizes what they are doing: "they are all a single people with a single language … this is but the start of their undertakings! There will be nothing too hard for them to do. Come let us go down and confuse their language on the spot so that they can no longer understand one another."[4] The result was that God pronounced the word Babel and "confused the language of the whole earth," thus scattering everyone over the "whole face of the earth" and ensuring that the project remained incomplete.[5] God thus initiates the necessity of translation, a process that prompted philosopher Jacques Derrida to insist that full communication became impossible after Babel.[6]

The story of the Tower of Babel as the source for Bruegel's painting can be seen as a plurality in itself. There were numerous versions of the story that existed in Bruegel's time. Art historian Margaret Carroll points out that besides Genesis, Herodotus in the fifth century BCE writes of an enormous tower in Babylon, and in *Jewish Antiquities*, Flavius Josephus attributes the plan to build a "Tower of Babylon" to Nimrod, the first king of the Babylonians.[7] In *City of God*, Saint Augustine also identifies Babel with Babylon and attributes the plan for the tower to Nimrod who is both a deceiver and an oppressor. For Augustine, Babel is identified as a sinful earthly city, as is Rome, which Augustine calls "that other Babylon of the west."[8] During Bruegel's time in Antwerp Carroll describes a flourishing interest in ancient texts, as well as the language of northern critics of the papacy, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, recasting Augustine's analogy between Babylon and Rome to reference the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church.

Carroll and other scholars have pointed out that it was quite common in 1560s Antwerp to invoke Babel or Babylon as a way

of describing the condition of religious controversy and confusion in the Netherlands. Lutheran broadsheets, sermons, and hymns all referred to Rome as Babel, and likewise Catholics claimed that the heretical reformers were causing turmoil by speaking in tongues. The Duke of Alva was unable to make much sense of the competing religious bodies and interests that characterized the city in 1568 when he wrote to Philip II complaining of Antwerp as "a Babylon, confusion and receptacle of all sects indifferently."[9] Both Catholics and Protestants used the Tower of Babel as a symbol of the dissolution of Christianity into warring factions. It was employed to describe and explain the fragmentation and disarray that plagued the modern world. On the other hand, it was also used to express a time of renewed vitality and a looking forward to the restoration of a lost unity and achievements of past cultures.

Not only were many humanist intellectuals working the Low Countries in the sixteenth century interested in the achievement of past cultures, they were also very interested in the questions and problems of language. Perhaps this interest was spurred because a certain universality or univocality of the Middle Ages, through its use of the Latin language, was being superseded with the introduction of the printing press. By the mid-sixteenth century the universal language of Latin was starting to be replaced by any language that was thought to be useful in performing the function of communication in mass print circulation. It could be argued that the notion of national identity and the writing of national literary histories, as well as the birth of the nation-state, are some of the consequences of this linguistic plurality.[10]

From a general social and historical perspective, Bruegel's *Towers* have been interpreted as reflecting the cultural and linguistic challenges facing the prosperous and multicultural metropolis of Antwerp. Art historian S.A. Mansbach's important essay, "Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," traces a relationship between the artist and the political and intellectual events and figures of the 1560s, primarily the plight of the Reformist intellectuals under Spanish rule and their deep longing for an ideal liberal community.[11] During the late 1550s and 1560s Flanders was under increasingly harsh Spanish domination, which led to a suppression of liberal Catholic or Protestant thought and service, whose sympathizers were among Bruegel's friends. The King depicted in the Vienna painting is perceived by Mansbach to be a hidden reference to the Spanish king, Philip II. As Mansbach asks: "Would not Philip's efforts to impose his

foreign will on industrious Flemish subjects appear to Antwerp's humanists as hubristic and his imposition of Catholic orthodoxy and Spanish rule as an "unnatural" politico-religious structure?"[12] Tying Philip closer to the story of the Tower of Babel was the fact that Philip could not speak either Dutch or French, but unlike Nimrod's failure due to God's intervention with the proliferation of languages, in Philip's case his inability to speak the local languages doomed his chances of ruling right from the start. The other often noted historical correlation to the paintings was Philip's building and reinforcement of Antwerp's city ramparts as a preparation for war with France, which added a financial burden on the city. Carroll notes that Bruegel's print *Ice-Skating Outside St. George's Gate in Antwerp*, identifies not only the massive ramparts that have practically hidden the city behind them, but the poem at the bottom of the print insinuates hubris and a reference to the financial scandals associated with the fortification project.[13] The ramparts were not quite of the towers' proportions, but the connection is compelling as the city surrounding the tower in the Vienna painting is reminiscent of a bustling harbour city like Antwerp.

Several years before Bruegel's Vienna *Tower*, a Tower of Babel painting appeared in the procession of the Feast of Assumption in Antwerp in 1561 and has been primarily interpreted as signifying the chastisement of pride and presumption. Thus there is a prevalent reading of Bruegel's *Tower* paintings as commentaries on social mores. For Mansbach, Philip II is a latter day Nimrod whose hubris engaged in an attempt to transform nature and the natural order into a Colosseum like tower. He reads Nimrod's as well as Philip II's vanity and pride as the grounds for their downfall.

In addition to Philip's religious, linguistic, cultural, and authoritative vanity, the Flemish were also concerned about their lack of political representation. Burdened by unbearably high taxation and endless warfare, in March 1563, the same year Bruegel painted the Vienna *Tower*, Flemish noblemen sent a letter to Philip criticizing his policies and threatened to resign their posts.[14] A crisis gathered momentum when the provinces and town councils remained loyal to their own people, who increasingly refused to pay the king's taxes. When it was all over, it was Philip's conception of himself as God's authority on earth whose responsibility it was to produce a type of unity, that ended up costing him the Low Countries.

Mansbach and other art historians have attempted to document Bruegel's involvement with humanism and humanists such as his friend and distinguished geographer Abraham Ortelius who

wrote a moving epitaph for the painter that is preserved in the *Album Amicorum*, in Pembroke College, Cambridge. Mansbach also links Bruegel to Hans Franckert, a reformist and a patron of the arts who was an intimate of the "Four Winds" circle, a small group of learned men and educated artist that gathered at one of Antwerp's leading publishing houses of the time.[15] The proprietor of the publishing house was Hieronymus Cock, who not only dealt in books about new humanist learning, but commissioned works from Bruegel and others which would appeal to his enlightened patrons and friends. In addition to the "Four Winds" circle, Mansbach claims that Bruegel was a friend of Christophe Plantin who controlled another large and important publishing firm.[16] The intriguing implication is that Bruegel may have been familiar with the fact that Plantin was working on his eight volume *Polyglot Bible* (finally published in 1572 several years after Bruegel's death), a compilation of sacred texts published in their original languages. Plantin's work again echoes the deep interest in language problems of many intellectuals working in the Low Countries the sixteenth century.

The problem with the attempts to link Bruegel with humanist circles, according to Perez Zagorin, is that there are few established facts for Bruegel's biography.[17] There is no record of his date or place of birth, and no information on his formal schooling. There are no letters or writings of any kind by Bruegel, or reports from his friends. It is known that he travelled to Rome and collaborated with the eminent painter of miniatures, Giulio Clovio. Most of the known information is from a brief biography in Carel van Mander's famous *Painter's Book*. Other than Bruegel's friendship with Ortelius none of the relationships to other humanists that are so often touted can be verified. Only connections through Bruegel's association with Ortelius can be made, and the question of whether Bruegel shared their views cannot be verified. However, it is known that Bruegel worked solely for patrons such as Nichalaes Jonghlick and Jean Noirot, who were learned men, but there is no proof that they were his friends. Zagorin also claims that there are no reasons to suppose that Bruegel was anything other than a Catholic, and some of his paintings such as *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562), the *Death of the Virgin* (1564), and *Christ on the Road to Calvary* (1564), are clearly Catholic in character.[18]

While it may not be possible to unlock the contradictions of where Bruegel's own sympathies lay, it is well established that the Low Countries in the mid-sixteenth century had strong

secular tendencies. Keith Moxey claims that in the Netherlands, where the ideas of Erasmus had already formed an audience of educated men critical of many of the practices of the church, the spread of the Reformation and Lutheran ideas was rapid and of lasting importance.[19] The population of Antwerp grew steadily to about 100,000 people in the 1560's, making it one of the leading cities in Europe. Antwerp was thriving; it was a European distribution centre for English textiles, spices from Asia, and various luxury items produced in northern France and the Low Countries. Additionally, these activities were supported by the presence of a foreign exchange, in which numerous bankers, money traders, and foreign investors were involved. Antwerp's commercial wealth meant that the city council was reluctant to adopt any policy that would be harmful for its trade. For example, when drastic measures against the heretics were proclaimed by Charles V in 1550, the council vigorously resisted and only made the measures public in the city after the wording had been significantly altered. Fears of the imposition of religious orthodoxy on its population would have meant the loss of the foreign trading communities, the principal agents of her prosperity, which were the primary reasons for this resistance. Thus Antwerp became a haven for refugees from other parts of the country where edicts concerning religion were more strictly enforced.

This secular tendency is also apparent in the ancient rhetorical societies, the *rederijkerkamer,* which enjoyed an unprecedented development and growth during the course of the sixteenth century. Moxey outlines the diverse and reciprocal relationships between artists and *rederijkers,* who often belonged to the same literary groups.[20] The *rederijkers* were dramatic associations that created, produced, and performed plays. They were a kind of late medieval form of entertainment with their plays being largely allegorical moralities. During the sixteenth century, the *rederijkers* and their plays became important agents in the dissemination of reformed ideas. These works often contained subversive and anti-government ideas with a strong Protestant tinge to them. Richard Clough, an English merchant in Antwerp wrote a letter on August 4, 1561 about the famous Antwerp "Landjuweel" held that year in which he described that the dramatic competitions of the rhetorical chambers had become "an arena for political cavil" and "the vehicle for the promulgation of religious opinion."[21] Authorities often made stringent efforts to control the performances, censor the productions, and discredit or condemn the more overtly heretical exponents of such ideas. Walter Gibson has suggested that the stories and plays of the *rederijkers*, as with the prints and paintings of artists, also articulated the practical mentality

of the Netherlandish middle classes. He claims that the development of a 'bourgeois ethos' during the later Middle Ages and early modern period is expressed by both *rederijkers* and artists who had similar didactic aims, to instruct as well as delight.[22]

Bruegel's patrons were most likely highly educated and familiar with the debates of the day. Larry Silver describes the emergence of a new body of collectors in Antwerp who were urban and prosperous.[23] Nichalaes Jonghlick was one of Bruegel's most important patrons. He was the son of the mint master of the province of Brabant and occupied the post of receiver of the Zeeland toll from 1551 onward. It was an extremely lucrative office since this toll was paid by every ship entering or leaving the port of Antwerp. Jonghlick commissioned Bruegel for the Vienna *Tower of Babel* and the *Way to Calvary*, 1564, as well as the series of the twelve *Months,* 1565. Jonghlinck's patronage, according to Moxey, suggests that Bruegel was much admired by members of Antwerp's ruling class.[24] A remarkable aspect of this cultivated Antwerp society was an appreciation of spiritual values held in common despite differences in institutional allegiance. The Venetian merchant Giovanni Zonca wrote admiringly about the extraordinary freedom of speech he found in Antwerp during the mid-1560s, though limits to these liberties varied from month to month.[25] The secular nature of this elite class is illustrated by the example of Ortelius, who was on good terms with both orthodox Catholics and Calvinists over a period of several decades.[26] Regardless of his personal beliefs, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Bruegel's continuing contact with Antwerp, the commercial capital of Northern Europe, made him especially sensitive to the comprehensive adoption of certain values of the society at large and his patrons in particular, such as a heightened respect for practicality, profit, social mobility, and individual interest.

When looking at Bruegel's Vienna version of *The Tower of Babel*, what is almost immediately evident is the contradiction between the giant crumbling, listing, and imposing Roman Coliseum like tower, and not only the bustling city surrounding it, but the industry with which it is being built. The tower is listing, apparently due to the ill-fated decision to build it on a swamp. It is still being built but visibly falling apart, and it looks as if it is being carved out of a mountain, which ironically may be a source for the tower's stone, thus destroying nature in the process of building the tower. It is an unstable mix of

architectural forms and styles: Roman, Near Eastern, and Romanesque. Yet along with the feeling of impending doom for the tower, there is paradoxical sense of human activity, ingenuity, and cooperation. The spirit with which it is being built is in contrast to the ambition and hubris behind the conception of the tower.

The prince-like figure at the bottom left of the painting, that is so often compared to Philip II, is surrounded by sycophants and workers who prostrate themselves in front of him. Joanne Morra suggests that since the workers are down on both knees instead of the tradition of one knee to address the Habsburgs, the prince could not be Philip II but is of Middle-Eastern origin and thus more in line with the biblical story.[27] In either case, the idea of a sovereign being dim witted and vain is being conveyed. The labourers to his left are already back to work as soon as his back is turned, and the foreman-like figure in the red hat seems more in control than the sovereign.

In opposition to the apparent failure of the sovereign's agenda, and despite the fact that the project is ill conceived, all around the tower is a complex network of functions and activities that speak to ingenuity, industriousness, and cooperative labour. Various pulleys and lifts act as marvels of technology to get stone and bricks up the tower; ships bring in products such as red bricks and lumber; and mortar mixers combine lime and sand for the bricklayers. Materials are being transformed, or it could be said translated, into something else in all these labours. As with the foreman wearing the red hat in the bottom left of the painting, the work appears to be self directed by workers who know what has to be done and are getting it done in an efficient and organized manner. Yet the labour does not appear to be forced by any kind of central enforcement authority. Everyday aspects of leisure and rest are depicted along with work in the fine details of the various levels of the Vienna version of the painting.

The contradictory nature emerges from the clash between the wild monumental ambition of the tower and the cooperative spirit of activity that is supporting it. The imposing project of a King does not seem like the best place to promote this kind of spirit. Yet the kind of thought that the painting appears to be encouraging is one sympathetic towards the adaptive quality of the Antwerp work force. There is a contrast between the object of construction and the process by which it is coming into being; between the monumentality of the tower and the tiny detail of the process of construction; and between the singularity of the King and the multiplicity of the workforce. It is the King's

ambition that is faulty, not the vitality and industriousness of the workers, which by itself is exemplary. The labour of the workers in the Vienna *Tower* is represented as a constructive practice that has a certain redemptive quality to it. It appears to reaffirm the integrity and efficaciousness of collective labour and a consciousness of the workers that remains true to itself despite the tyranny of the sovereign. It is through collective labour that a consciousness is created that is capable of challenging authority, thus labour has the paradoxical qualities of being both a method of escape as well as the source of enslavement.

Umberto Eco points out that Hegel's radical interpretation of the Babel story claims that the construction of the tower was not only a metaphor for the social structures linking a people to their state, but also a celebration of the almost sacred character of collective human labour.[28] Hegel states: "the ensemble of all the peoples at that period worked at this task and since they all came together to complete an immense work like this, the product of their labour was to be a bond which was to link them together …"[29] In this interpretation the tower prefigures the ethical state and means that the unity of the state is not universal, but a unity that gives life to different nations. Thus the tower of Babel is an event necessary to set social, political, and scientific history in motion, what can be seen as the first glimmer of the Age of Progress and Reason. In fact the numerous ways in which Bruegel depicts the machines and construction techniques appears to be making a secular statement of faith in human progress. Alain Touraine, the French sociologist, claims utopia is a plea for a society that creates itself. For Touraine, the history of utopia began only when society abandoned the image of paradise, and thus utopia is one of the products of secularization.[30]

Like Bruegel's Vienna *Tower*, Thomas More's *Utopia* is also a product of Antwerp, written when More was Henry VIII's ambassador there in 1515. It was first published in 1516 under the editorship of Erasmus, Peter Giles, and other of More's friends in Flanders. Everyone on the island of Utopia in More's book is diligently engaged in work, in a not dissimilar fashion to the workers in Bruegel's paintings. The 'Syphogrants,' or locally elected magistrates, make sure that everyone has a trade and all are employed "in some useful labour."[31] However, they do not work so hard as to be beasts of burden; there is time for leisure and everyone is encouraged to read in his or her spare time. Nevertheless, there is a clear message of emphasis on work,

utility, efficiency, and being engaged in an activity that is in some way helpful to the community. Some of the types of trades that they are involved in are agriculture, manufacturing, weaving, masonry, smith's work, and carpentry. Overall they manage with fewer resources primarily because they want less, and being busy in a trade is seen as a virtue. Their efficiency and lack of want does not result in idleness. There is a sense of self-improvement and community allegiance through work. Labour is thus a key component to More's *Utopia* and his idea of self-governance. This is in stark contrast to some modern utopias where the idea is that technology does all the work allowing the utopians to concentrate on leisure.

In his analysis of Bruegel's *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, Ross Hamilton argues that Bruegel's paintings portray a transitional moment of becoming, "an event suspended between one condition and another whose full consequences lie forever in the future."[32] According to Hamilton, Bruegel's perpetuation of the process of change, by freezing it in an unrealized state, allows viewers to re-experience the subject afresh in accordance with their own contemplative development. It allows them to "travel vicariously," akin to perusing one of the new cartographic descriptions of the discovered world, and encourages a kind of contemplative meditation.[33] This seems to be a particularly interesting way of thinking that can be applied to both Bruegel's *Towers* and More's *Utopia* for a number of reasons. First, the notion of becoming, an unrealized state where the consequences lie in the future, is much like the quality of anticipation noted at the beginning of this essay. The moment is not resolved and fixed for the viewer, but demands the active labour of interpretation and translation for its discovery. Furthermore, the notion of mapping and discovery is also poignant. Not only did Bruegel produce a considerable amount of work for his cartographer friend Ortelius, who in turn also produced a map of utopia, but because the detail of the Vienna *Tower* is in some respects cartographic, it appears to duplicate, in its visual terms, the intricacies of reading a map. As Hamilton points out, Ortelius wrote in his tribute to Bruegel: "In all his works there is always more to be understood than he actually painted."[34] Clearly, a certain intellectual effort was needed to realize the potential that Bruegel's pictures offered. Although his paintings are not elaborate puzzles on the order of a rebus, which was so popular among the *rederijkers*, they have a riddle like quality that suggests a level of meaning beyond the obvious. According to Ethan Matt Kavaler, the appreciation for such a demanding practice of viewing was a mark of social distinction and might be presumed of an audience that included such discriminating collectors as Abraham Ortelius and Niclaes

Jongelinck.[35] Bruegel's patrons, as cultivated intellectuals, would have been comfortable with decoding the complexities of reference contained in Bruegel's work and would have probably enjoyed the contemplative labour involved.

Utopia is necessarily an example of a society that creates itself, as Touraine suggests, where freedom and equality are imposed on its members who voluntarily accept its constraints.[36] It is a society where everything is public service, voluntarism is absolute, and the good is the common good where the individual must submit to society in order to attain happiness and self-realization. The essential thing in *Utopia* was to criticize the "belligerent and prodigal nobility" through a critique that had full confidence in reason and was opposed to wealth and power.[37] The familiar ring to this critique can be cast in the direction of the Reformation, which right from its inception could also be said to be profoundly utopian. It shook the institutionalized church from the bottom up, and it liberated individual conscience from submission and obedience to tradition and authority. More, in one sense, transforms utopian society into a monastery not unlike Luther who calls for a renewal of the religious thinking of the Middle Ages by liberating the nascent rationalism of the monasteries and spreading it to all domains of life.

Likewise, similar connotations with respect to authority and self-regulation are working simultaneously in the internal dynamics of the Vienna *Tower of Babel*. The authorial power of the sovereign and his agenda is crumbling like the Roman Colosseum with its overdetermined allegory to the Roman Church and its oppression of the Low Countries. Additionally, being translated into something closer to a utopian social critique than a moral proverb challenges the authorial power of the original story of the Tower of Babel. As in the *Polyglot Bible*, each new translation means a testing of the Church's authority because the word of God was being debated and transformed. The original loses its authority in each translation, and while translation is necessary for communication, translation is also impossible because of the chaos brought about by the multiple languages of the Babel. As a result, translation's task can now never be finished. In Bruegel's painting there is a sense that the viewer is asked to work in the same way that the figures in the painting are labouring. The image's various intricate details demand of the viewer an energy to remap the content, which in turn enables the production of multiple interpretations of those

details.

Translation theory posits that, since the original needs translation, there must be something lacking in it to require a translation, and each new translation repeats this gesture and thus must always fail. In this way it is always in a state of becoming; it can never be complete. Jacques Derrida views translation as always in the process of modifying the original text, of deferring forever any possibility of grasping that which the original text desired to name. Yet the source text "lives on" and it "lives more and better" and it lives "beyond the means of the author."[38] For Derrida, translation of the original becomes something larger, "like a child" that grows "with the power to speak on its own."[39]

Philosopher Andrew Benjamin writing on translation theory claims that there is no such thing as an original. Since the original is always already a translation, it can only be understood as an 'anoriginal' because it is itself the site of plurality.[40] Like a dream that is analyzed by a psychoanalyst, the dream is not the original, having already been translated by the patient for the analyst. Similarly, the Babel myth of the existence of a unified language, as Benjamin argues, is always already a displaced language. Language itself is not original; it originates from no place.

Perhaps this cacophony of language problems can be somewhat resolved by looking at Bruegel's Rotterdam *Tower*, which at first glance appears to be a more complete and unified structure. It is described by Mansbach as "a visual metaphor of mankind in a state of grace: Babel has been remedied."[41] He points out that there is no signature on the panel, it is a more modest size, and there is no King, as there was in the Vienna painting. For Mansbach, this deleting of the reference to both the power of the King and the artist points to the removal of the emphasis on human vanity. He insists that the workers "seem to labour of their own accord without being compelled by a sovereign's prideful will."[42] The tower itself is almost finished, it is no longer crumbling, and for Mansbach there is little hint of an impending tragedy. In fact he claims that Bruegel's message is one that is shared by Christophe Plantin's *Polyglot Bible,* the hope of returning to the "atavistic sources of sacral language somehow a harmonious and religious world might be posited for the future."[43] The intellectual interest in language problems is seen by Mansbach as not about the disintegration of an original language so much as the opposite, a utopic impulse for a future unified language and a Christian world where the hubris of a Nimrod or a Philip is not only absent, but could be remedied.[44]

Again there is this sense of a looking forward to the restoration of a lost unity and achievements of past cultures.

An intriguing historical figure that neither Mansbach nor any other Bruegel scholar mentions is Goropius Becanus (Jan Van Gorp) who wrote *Origines Antwerpianae* in 1569. According to Umberto Eco, Becanus claimed that the ancestors of the burghers of Antwerp were the Cimbri, the direct descendents of the sons of Japheth and were not present under the Tower of Babel so they were spared the *confusion lunguarum*.[45] In other words they had preserved the language of Adam. For Becanus, the Dutch language, and particularly the dialect of Antwerp, was exemplary and possessed a richness of sounds superior to all other languages and he believed that he could prove its perfection through etymological demonstrations.[46] There is a possible connection to Bruegel here by association since Christophe Plantin published Becanus's book and Bruegel's friend and patron Abraham Ortelius was an admirer of Becanus. Although absurd, Becanus's claim seems to be in line with Mansbach's interpretation of the Rotterdam *Tower* since it points to the special or 'chosen' nature of the Dutch people, highlighting a nationalistic pride that had bypassed the tyrannical Nimrod in the past and by implication could do without his likes in the future.

In contrast to Mansbach's interpretation, the Rotterdam version appears considerably less utopic to me, which is also noted by other art historians such as Joanne Morra and Edward Snow. The workers that Mansbach describes as labouring on their own are barely visible at all and do not elicit the same sympathy as the more discernible workers do in the Vienna version. Significantly, however, what is missing from this version is the city of Antwerp in the background. The city is not only important to the notion of More's utopic community, but to nearly all versions of utopia whether they are in a speculative form like Plato's *Republic* or fantasy like the "New Jerusalem" of the Bible. The influential bourgeois concept of the "freedom of the city" was developed in the late middle ages revolving around the concept of the city as a place where one could shake off the constraints of not only village life, but of serfdom and the feudal order. In contrast, the Rotterdam *Tower* is situated in the middle of a barren landscape, thus seemingly located more in the serfdom of the countryside than in the freedom of the city.

While Bruegel was painting the Rotterdam version, it is worthwhile noting that hostilities were escalating between the

Flemish people and Philip II's rule to such an extent that Philip eventually decided to impose the Inquisition. This attempt to unify the Low Countries under Catholic and Spanish authority, to silence the heretics, can take on the same meaning as the impossibility of the unity of the language of God. In the end, Philip's attempts at a totalizing unity were thwarted by a plurality of translations and interpretations. In this light the Rotterdam *Tower* takes on a more threatening sense because of its near completion and unity. Can it be, as Morra writes, that the Rotterdam painting is a critique of the Church's repression of alternative religions, and the voices of the Flemish people?[47]

The near completion of the tower in the Rotterdam version and the menacing clouds give it an odd totalitarian or panoptical feeling that evokes a kind of total submission to a central authority. The contrast between the tower and the barely visible people puts it outside a human scale, and its monumentality has a frightening quality to it. Formally and structurally Bruegel's two versions seem to work it different ways. The Rotterdam version does not lend itself to the same kind of detailed observation encouraged by the Vienna version. Since the Rotterdam version is smaller in size and the perspective is from further away, it enables it to be read all at once and thus does not encourage a prolonged visual inquiry. In other words, the Rotterdam painting conveys a near totalization where the tower dominates and the humans are minimized to such an extent that they are almost imperceptible. It is the near completion that is a nightmare, versus the ongoing becoming of a utopic spirit coming together to build the tower in the Vienna version.

What is certain by now is that the two versions of Bruegel's *Towers* tend to draw out at least two different kinds of translations. There is an almost uncanny resemblance in the difference between the two *Towers* to More's *Utopia*, which itself is divided into two; the first half consisting of a polyphonic dialogue in Peter Giles's Antwerp garden, followed by the Utopian monologue of Raphael Hythloday in the second half. Bruegel's *Towers* and More's *Utopia*, from a contemporary perspective, both raise questions about the double face of utopia. At what point does this confidence in the reason of utopia become a totalitarian dystopia? All the cities in More's island Utopia are "spacious and magnificent, identical in language, traditions, customs, and laws. They are similar also in layout and everywhere, as far as the nature of the ground permits, similar even in appearance."[48] This univocity calls up a pre-Babel unity, appearing to be a conservative ideology of looking to the past at the same time that it is looking to the future. Modern political philosophers such as Robert Nozick

view utopia in a very different light. For Nozick a real utopia is a framework for utopias, meaning that it is a place where people are at liberty to join together voluntarily to pursue their own visions of the good life in the ideal community but where no one can impose their own utopian vision upon others.[49] Thus utopia is a society of utopias or a plurality of utopias. This of course sounds vaguely like democracy, and it is perhaps why contemporary viewers may find Bruegel's Vienna version more in line with a cooperative utopic spirit. However, it is not by any means clear that it would have been read that way in the sixteenth century. In fact Mansbach may well be right that the Rotterdam version speaks to a sixteenth-century desire for a future unified language and Christian world. Nevertheless, what seems to me to be important is the process by which the paintings produce meaning, rather than decoding what the meaning in the paintings actually is, and if this process results in multiple interpretations then all the better.

The attempt to make sense of Bruegel's aporias can be seen as analogous to the process or the act of translation, which as has been discussed, was a radical act in the sixteenth century. Humanist scholarship rendered translation into an increasingly visible art by producing scores of new translations. Perhaps the true utopian is the translator who puts labour and energy into the reinterpreting and re-authoring process. The ability to engage in translating or re-authoring of the original implies the challenging of the authority of the original and the subsequent importance of both the process of translation and self-narration for social transformation. A type of cultural pedagogy takes place in that it draws the reader or viewer in and provides them with some cognitive skills necessary to inhabit and think through epochal change. Bruegel's paintings contain this anticipatory quality of becoming, marking a place in the future emerging in the present that proposes a space where there is freedom from tyrannical rule. This place can only come about through the process of labouring through one's own translations. A process that can never be totally completed, nor should it be, or else it becomes someone else's utopia.

Notes

[1] Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* (New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc., 1984), 163.
[2] Joanne Morra summarizes the history of these paintings in "Utopia Lost: Allegory, Ruins and Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," *Art History* 30 (2007): 200.
[3] Genesis 11:6 – 8.
[4] Genesis 11:10 – 11.
[5] Genesis 11:10 – 11.
[6] Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 170.

[7] Margaret D. Carroll, *Painting and Politics in Norther Europe: Van Eyck, Bruegel, Rubens, And Their Contemporaries* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 75.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 42.
[10] Brian Stock, "Toward Interpretive Pluralism: Literary History and the History of Reading." *New Literary History* 39 (2008): 394.
[11] S.A. Mansbach, "Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 45 Bd., H. 1 (1982): 43.
[12] Ibid., 48.
[13] Carroll, *Painting and Politics*, 72.
[14] Morra, "Utopia Lost: Allegory, Ruins and Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," 202.
[15] Mansbach, "Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," 47.
[16] Ibid., 52.
[17] Perez Zagorin, "Looking for Pieter Bruegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 64, No.1 (2003): 76.
[18] Ibid., 87.
[19] Keith Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting in the Context of the Reformation* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 139.
[20] Ibid., 149.
[21] Ibid., 152.
[22] Walter S. Gibson, "Artist and Rederijkers in the Age of Bruegel," The Art Bulletin, Vol 63, No. 3 (1981): 444.
[23] Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes* (Philedelphia: University of Pennsylvannia Press, 2006), 9.
[24] Keith Moxey, "Pieter Bruegel and Popular Culture," in *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Edler*, ed., David Freedberg, 44 (Tokyo: Tokyo Shimbun, 1989).
[25] Ibid.
[26] Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, 42.
[27] Morra, "Utopia Lost: Allegory, Ruins and Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," 207.
[28] Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 341.
[29] Ibid., 342.
[30] Alain Touraine, "Society as Utopia" in *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, eds. Roland Schaer et al, 26 (New York: New York Public Library, 2000).
[31] Thomas More, Utopia, http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2130 (accessed December 21, 2009).
[32] Ross Hamilton, "Bruegel's Falling Figures," *Viator* (2008): 386.
[33] Ibid., 392.
[34] Ibid., 398.
[35] Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise*, 258.
[36] Alain Touraine, "Society as Utopia," 21.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham 178-9 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
[39] Ibid., 191.
[40] Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A new Theory of Words* (London: Routledge, 1989), 147.
[41] Mansbach, "Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," 49.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 53.
[44] Ibid., 54.
[45] Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, 96.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Morra, "Utopia Lost: Allegory, Ruins and Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel," 212.
[48] Thomas More, Utopia, http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2130 (accessed December 21, 2009).
[49] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1974), 312.