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Umberto Eco and the Echoes of Adamic Language

Abstract

Many early modern writers were fascinated by the notion of the Adamic language in which Adam named the animals, a language that many believed could express the essence of things perfectly. Umberto Eco has displayed a recurrent interest in Adamic language in both his scholarship and his fiction, and this article pays tribute to Eco through placing his work in conversation with a number of scholarly fields in which the idea of Adamic language occurs, including studies of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, the history of science, and early Mormonism. The article concludes by challenging some of the theoretical assumptions made about Adamic language, both by Eco and in early modern discussions, through a rereading of Adam's speech in Genesis 2.

Umberto Eco, Adamic language, Edenic speech, Genesis, John Milton

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Man gave names to all the animals
In the beginning, in the beginning.
Man gave names to all the animals
In the beginning, long time ago.

He saw an animal that liked to growl,
Big furry paws and he liked to howl,
Great big furry back and furry hair.
"Ah, think I'll call it a bear".

(Dylan 1979)

This is the beginning of a song from Bob Dylan's 1979 album *Slow Train Coming*, the first of three albums typically identified as part of Dylan's "Christian" or "born again" period following his professed conversion to Christianity. The song is a retelling of the biblical account of Adam naming the animals in Genesis 2. Ruvik Danieli and Anat Biletzki remind us that this song is perhaps deceptively simple:

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that some have mistaken this deceptive song for a child's ditty, a rock-era variation on "Old MacDonald Had a Farm". But to ascribe merely a juvenile intent to "Man Gave Names to All the Animals" is to miss this metaphysical poet at his most profound, just as he comes to question the very possibility of conveying his meaning — or any, for that matter.
(Danieli and Biletzki 2006: 90)

These questions about the possibility of meaning and the relation of language to meaning are ones that have clustered around Dylan's source text in Genesis:

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.
(Genesis 2:19−20)[1]

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[1]   Biblical quotations are taken from the Authorised/King James Version.

This passage engaged the attention of many thinkers in the early modern period in particular. For early modern commentators, Adamic language was thought to be significant because of the properties it was thought to have had. While some thought that Adam's language was a "conventional" language, in which Adam made an arbitrary choice as to which sounds to attach to which object, many believed that Adamic language possessed the capacity to match words to things perfectly, and thus to express the true essence of things in a way that later human languages could not. Many early modern thinkers wished to recover these properties of language.

In turn, this quest for the Adamic language has captivated Umberto Eco throughout his career, most notably in his wide-ranging historical survey *The Search for the Perfect Language*, and his essay "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language", in which Eco himself plays with the idea of the Edenic language as a theoretical construct (and finds it wanting)[2].

"Sudden Apprehension": Adamic Language in Milton Studies

One key locus in early modern English literature for this discussion is a passage in John Milton's biblical epic poem *Paradise Lost*. In Milton's rendition of the naming of the animals, Adam recalls:

> I named them, as they passed, and understood
> Their nature, with such knowledge God endued
> My sudden apprehension[.] (Book VIII: 352−4)
> (Milton 1998: 448)[3]

Although Eco does not cite Milton in *The Search for the Perfect Language*, literary studies of Milton have engaged many of the same questions and texts as Eco with regard to early modern discussions of Adamic language. Likewise, not many Milton scholars cite Eco, but their research projects converge in mutually illuminating ways. For instance, John Leonard's *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve*, published a few years before Eco's study, surveys many of the same writers as are found in the early modern chapters of Eco's study, such as John Webster, John Wilkins, John Locke, and Seth Ward[4]. Robert Entzminger covered similar ground in the 1980s, seeing the seventeenth-century quest for a pure Edenic language as witnessing to anxieties about fallen language that surface in Milton's work (Entzminger 1985).

In Leonard's reading of the above passage from *Paradise Lost*, Adam's naming of the animals is not secondary to his understanding — rather it is in the very act of naming that Adam comes to understand:

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[2]   Eco 1995; 1981. As will become apparent, discussions of Adamic language also surface repeatedly in Eco's novels, including Eco 1983; 1989; 2002.

[3]   Further references to *Paradise Lost* in body of text by book and line numbers.

[4]   Leonard 1990, esp. "Introduction": 1−22. Cf. esp. chapters 10 to 13 of Eco 1995 (209−268).

> In Milton's lines, the name is a means whereby Adam apprehends the nature; it is not an inevitable consequence of the nature. "Sudden apprehension" suggests something other than the passive receiving of an idea: it implies an act of "grasping with the intellect; the forming of an idea" (*OED* "apprehension" 7). (Leonard 1990: 12)

Leonard, like Eco, explores the question of whether Adamic language is essentialist or conventional:

> Does Adam give names at random, thus sanctioning man's right to give names by custom and convention? Or does he recognize the appropriateness of a certain name to a certain creature?
> (Leonard 1990: 1)

Or, to put it in the terms of the Bob Dylan song with which we started: on what basis does the man thinks he'll call this creature a "bear"? Is it just because he chooses to use this word to refer to this creature or is it that the word "bear" (or whatever the actual Adamic word for "bear" was) corresponds in some way to the essence of bearness?

Both Leonard and Eco discuss the various options put forward for identifying which actual language was spoken by Adam and Eve — the basic options being Hebrew (or a purer form of Hebrew), a modern vernacular language or its ancestral form, or a language that was lost either at the Fall or at the Tower of Babel (a view held both by the rationalist-leaning Thomas Hobbes and the mystical Jakob Böhme, who nevertheless believed that he himself had been granted access to that language).

Eco more recently recapitulates this debate in his novel *Baudolino*, with the Irish-Provençal-Arabic boy Abdul recollecting, "My mother always told me that the language of Adam was reconstructed on her island, and it is the Gaelic language, composed of nine parts of speech, the same number as the nine materials from which the tower of Babel was built"[5]. Abdul is rebuffed "indulgently" by Rabbi Solomon, who replies, "Many nations believe that theirs is the language of Adam, forgetting that Adam could speak only the language of the Torah, not of those books that tell of false and lying gods". However, this is not the Hebrew of the Torah as it now exists, but that of "The original Torah, at the moment of the creation, […] written like black fire upon white fire", and so the apparently kabbalist rabbi seeks to recover the Adamic language by making "the letters of the written Torah […] spin like the wheel of a mill" into their "original order"[6] (Eco 2002: 127–28).

Where Leonard notes briefly that "Others found the original language in various Gentile languages: Nicholas Severius in Samaritan, Johannes Geropius Becanus in Dutch, and John Webb in Chinese" (Leonard 1990: 14–15)[7], Eco provides a more extensive and entertaining survey. We learn that Jan van Gorp argued in a 1569 work that the original language was Dutch, and in particular the dialect of Antwerp, since the ancestors of the burghers of Antwerp were not present at the Tower of Babel when the languages were confused (Eco 1995: 96–97). Georg Philipp Harsdörffer argued in 1641 that it must have been German,

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[5]   Referring to the Irish grammatical work *Auracepit na n-Éces* ("the precepts of the poets"), discussed in Eco 1995: 16–17.

[6]   Rabbi Solomon's speech closely echoes Eco's account of the kabbalists' "primordial Torah" in Eco 1995: 25–26.

[7]   Drawing on Katz 1981.

since German "speaks in the languages of nature, quite perceptibly expressing all its sounds" (Harsdörffer 1968−1969: 335ff, cited in Eco 1995: 99). Not to be outdone, Andreas Kempe's 1688 pamphlet *Die Sprachen des Paradises* (The Languages of Paradise) proposes that God spoke Swedish, Adam spoke Danish, and the serpent spoke French (Eco 1995: 97).

Leonard is drawing on a broader tradition in Milton studies. In particular, as a student of Christopher Ricks, Leonard is contributing to a conversation sparked by Ricks around ambivalences and ambiguities in the language of *Paradise Lost* itself. Ricks draws attention to the presence in Milton's verse of words that carry sinister connotations even though they purport to describe the prelapsarian paradise. For instance, words such as "error" (IV: 239, VII: 302), "lapse" (VIII: 263), "luxurious" (IX: 209), and "wanton" (IV: 306, 629, 768; V: 295; and IX: 211; cf. the "fallen" uses at I: 414, 455; IX: 517, 1015; and XI: 583, 795) are given "innocent" meanings drawing on their Latinate etymology to describe such phenomena as the wandering of rivers, the falling of streams, the exuberant growth of the garden, and Eve's enticing hair[8].

Ricks argues that this conjunction of innocence and foreboding in Milton's choice of vocabulary is deliberate:

> *Error* here is not exactly a pun, since it means only "wandering" — but the "only" is a differ-ent thing from an absolutely simple use of the word, since the evil meaning is consciously and ominously excluded. Rather than the meaning being simply "wandering", it is "wandering (not error)". Certainly the word is a reminder of the Fall, in that it takes us back to a time when there were no infected words because there were no infected actions. (Ricks 1963: 110)

Ricks's readings are also picked up by Stanley Fish as part of a highly influential reading of *Paradise Lost* in which the reader discovers herself or himself to be fallen through the experi-ence of reading[9]. As part of this larger project, Fish discusses the attempts of John Webster, John Wilkins, Thomas Sprat and the Royal Society of London to retrieve a language that, if not the actual Adamic language, recovers something of its primal purity[10].

Such questions around prelapsarian and postlapsarian language remain prominent in scholarly discussions of *Paradise Lost*[11], but engagement with Eco among Miltonists remains limited[12]. One Miltonist who has recently engaged Eco is Martin Kuester, who applies Eco's theoretical essay 'On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Lan-guage' to a reading of *Paradise Lost* (2009: 91−92). Kuester notes that Eco "recently also wrote an important study of the history of the search for the ideal language" (Kuester 2009: 91), but it is Eco as theoretician rather than historian of Edenic language that Kuester enlists. Kuester picks up on Eco's suggestion that God's prohibition of the forbidden fruit

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[8] The example of "error" is borrowed by Ricks from Stein 1953: 66–67, though the other examples appear to be original to Ricks.

[9] Fish 1997: esp. 92−94, 102−3, 134−36, 210, 235−36.

[10] Fish, esp. chapter 3 (92−157).

[11] See, for instance, Sugimura 2009: 57−71. Sugimura recapitulates the early modern debate over conventional ver-sus essentialist models of Adamic language, citing a varied range of theological sources including Martin Luther, the Dutch Remonstrant Simon Episcopius, the Spanish Jesuit Benedictus Pererius, and the German Reformed scholar David Pareus.

[12] For instance, a recent study gives him one footnote (Lynch 2015: 94n. 26), while many do not reference Eco at all.

disrupts the sign system of the Edenic language by breaking the connection between what is good and what is attractive, and argues that the angel Raphael's "accommodated" relation of the war in heaven in Adam and Eve's limited human language concedes an imperfection in Edenic speech (Kuester 2009: 92). Christopher Eagle briefly cites Eco with regard to the naming of the animals in Milton and Genesis (Eagle 2007: 185−86).

William Poole, a literary scholar whose first book was on Milton, has written a more historically oriented article discussing the theological similarities and differences between the three seventeenth-century language planners John Wilkins, George Delgarno, and Francis Lodwick (Poole 2003; 2005). Curiously, although these specific figures are the subjects of three consecutive chapters in Eco's study, Poole nowhere cites Eco in his discussion of them.

It seems that the Miltonists have been pursuing a parallel course to Eco, citing secondary scholarly sources as well as primary texts that Eco also engages, but without directly citing Eco's work. There remains plenty of room for conversation around Adamic language between cultural and linguistic studies in the tradition of Eco and Milton studies in the wake of Leonard.

"Declare to them the Names": The Passive Exaltation of the Qur'anic Adam

In the Islamic tradition, there is an intriguing parallel to the Genesis account of Adam's naming of the animals in Surah 2 of the Qur'an[13]. In this account, God (Allah) appoints man/Adam as his "Vicar upon Earth", but the angels object to this elevated position being given to the earthly and seemingly already incipiently sinful man:

> Remember to instruct men, that thy Lord said to his Angels, I would create a Vicar upon Earth; and when they answered, Wilt thou place him that shall defile it, and shed blood, while we exalt thy Glory, and sanctifie thee? I know, said he, what you know not. [Surah 2:30]
> (*Alcoran* 1649: 3−4)[14]

It is to put the angels in their place that God bestows upon Adam the knowledge of all things, as encapsulated in their names:

> He taught *Adam* the names of all things, who discovered them to the Angels, to whom God said, Declare to me the names of all things that I have created, if you know them; they replyed, Praise is due to thy Divine Majesty, we know nothing but what thou hast taught us, thou alone art knowing and wise. He said to *Adam*, Declare to them the names of all things that I have created. After he had taught them, God said, Did I not tell you, that I knew what is not, neither in Earth, nor Heaven; and that I understand whatever you make manifest, and whatever you keep most secret? [Surah 2:31−34] (*Alcoran* 1649: 4)

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13   I cite here from the 1649 English translation of the Qur'an (titled *The Alcoran of Mahomet*), which was contemporaneous with Milton. There is no definitive proof that Milton read the Qur'an (which was also available in Latin), though work in progress by Sharihan Al-Akhras will argue that he did, drawing on some intriguing parallels between the Qur'anic narratives and *Paradise Lost*. For broader discussions of Milton's engagement with Arabic and Islamic sources, see, for instance, MacLean 2007, Sid-Ahmad 2012, and Currell and Gleyzon 2015.

14   The verse numbers are not given in this translation.

However, despite the conceptual connection, there are significant differences in the narrative structure and function of this episode in the Qu'ranic context as compared to that of Genesis. Although the Qu'ranic text treats the knowledge of the names as a marker of humanity's significance and divinely given authority, the Qu'ranic Adam is not given the agency that God gives to Adam in Genesis — where God gives Adam the opportunity to name the animals in Genesis 2, in Surah 2 of the Qu'ran Adam passively receives the names of the creatures from God.

This passage played a role in medieval Islamic discussions of the origins of language that parallel the early modern European discussions on language. Lothar Kopf writes that whereas the Mu'tazilites tended towards the view that humans invented language by mutual agreement, "orthodox circles seemingly preferred the view that language owed its existence to divine revelation" (1956: 56), partly as a consequence of Surah 2. Surah 2 left room for exegetical debate, however, over whether the "names" given to Adam were personal names rather than names for inanimate objects, whether "names" signifies that only nouns were divinely bestowed and not other parts of speech, and whether only some words were of divine origin and others of human invention (Kopf 1956: 55−59).

The Islamic tradition is mentioned only a couple of times in Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language*, partly due to Eco's stated focus on European civilisation, but it is given almost the last word in Eco's book through the story told by Arab writer Ibu Hazm, in which the original language contained many words for each thing and was then fragmented into other languages[15]. Eco seems to like this story because it values linguistic plurality rather than a totalitarian monolingualism, though, as he notes, the Christian narrative of Pentecost (Acts 2), in which the Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to speak in many tongues, also holds out the promise of "finding in the multiplicity of tongues no longer a wound that must, at whatever cost, be healed, but rather the key to the possibility of a new alliance and of a new concord" (Eco 1995: 351)[16].

"In the Footsteps of Adam": Scientists, Kabbalists, and Latter-day Saints

In the seventeenth century, there was not so much space as we might think between esoteric modes of thinking, such as numerology and the Kabbalah, and the modes of thinking that have developed into modern science — Isaac Newton was an alchemist as well as a mathematician. Both employed the notion of a language that corresponds to how things really are, and so gives humanity power over the world.

Adam is a major character in Peter Harrison's wide-ranging account on how Augustinian and Protestant notions of the cognitive damage caused by the Fall underlay the emergence of empirical science in early modern Europe (Harrison 2007). In his treatment of Adamic language, Harrison, one of the current leading historians of science and religion, covers much as the same ground on this topic as Eco and the Miltonists (discussing, among other topics, Francis Bacon, John Wilkins, George Dalgarno, and Kabbalism) yet, once again, without citing Eco (Harrison 2007: esp. 191−198, 205−16).

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[15]   Eco 1995: 89 and 352, citing Borst 1957−63: I: 339 and I: 325f.

[16]   Cf. Michael Lloyd, who notes that, in Acts 2:11, the works of God are heard "Not in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the ancient world, not in some spiritual Esperanto, but *in our own languages* — which is a massive affirmation of who we are, and where we come from, and the cultural diversity we represent" (Lloyd 2012: 264).

Harrison first mentions the search for an "ideal philosophical language" that "would recapture at least some of the elements of the original Adamic tongue" in relation to Francis Bacon (Harrison 2007: 176). According to Bacon, "the book of creation […] is that speech and language which has gone out to all the ends of the earth, and has not suffered the confusion of Babel" (Bacon 1857−74: II:14f, cited in Harrison 2007: 176), and so true knowledge of things is still available even to fallen humanity through careful investigation. As the detective monk William of Baskerville tells his novice Adso in Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, "the world speaks to us like a great book […] not only of the ultimate things (which it does always in an obscure fashion) but also of closer things, and then it speaks quite clearly" (Eco 1983: 23−24).

Elsewhere Harrison has written on the metaphorical application of Adam's naming of the animals to the taxonomical work of the eighteenth-century Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, concluding that "not only Linnaeus but all of those involved in the work of ordering, naming, and classifying could legitimately be regarded as following in the footsteps of Adam" (Harrison 2009: 893). In this article, Harrison alludes to the short story "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" by Jorge Luis Borges, a writer in many ways comparable to Eco in his postmodern playfulness and remixing of intellectual history for his readers' entertainment.

John Wilkins himself was a natural philosopher and bishop, whose 1668 work *An Essay towards a Real Character and Philosophical Language* proposed creating a language of direct correspondence between words and things, with no ambiguous words, no metaphors and no synonyms (Wilkins 1668). Many later seventeenth-century thinkers did not think it was possible to retrieve the original language itself, but they were inspired by the idea that it was possible to create a perfect language, perhaps a language of mathematical symbols, that did the same thing (Leonard 1990: 17−18). As the last few chapters of Eco's study recount, the eighteenth century onwards saw the notion of a perfect language being displaced into the project to construct an artificial universal language with Edenic properties, rather than to recover the past Adamic tongue itself [17]. This started to get people thinking about the structure of language as such, and not just about particular languages already in existence, and so this quest for the Adamic language helped to lay some of the theoretical foundations of modern linguistics [18].

Nevertheless, despite this secularisation of the notion of Adamic language from the eighteenth century onwards, the tradition continued to be transmitted and transmuted in religious and esoteric contexts. Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, whose section headings are named after the ten Sefirot (divine emanations) of the Jewish Kabbalah, features a computer named Abulafia, in honour of the medieval Jewish Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia discussed in *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Eco 1989; 1995: esp. 25−33, 46−52) In *Foucault's Pendulum*, in the course of concocting an elaborate conspiracy, the publisher Garamond leafs through an amusingly improbable directory of secret societies. In a list of 45 named groups including assorted Rosicrucians, Satanists, and Jesuits, he comes across "the Mormons (I read about them in a detective story, too, but maybe they don't exist anymore)" (Eco 1989: 265) [19].

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[17]   Eco 1995, chapters 14 to 16 (269−336).

[18]   See, for instance, Aarsleff 1982.

[19]   The detective story could perhaps be Doyle 1888.

Mormon origins is a contested field, and the attribution of elements of Mormon thought to esoteric sources such as the Kabbalah has proved particularly contentious. Samuel Brown strikes what appears to me a plausible middle ground:

> Smith's formal involvement with Kabbalah has been overstated in various sources. […] However, Smith's interest in the power of language certainly bears at least a phenotypic similarity with other esoteric traditions about the power of language, including Kabbalah. (2012: 57 n. 24)[20]

Brown has shown that the notion of Adamic language possessing a special power and the desire to retrieve it were available to Joseph Smith and the early Mormons in the wider ante-bellum American culture, without needing access to specific scholarly sources (Brown 2009; 2012). In particular, the idea that Egyptian hieroglyphs might preserve a closer Edenic correlation between signs and things, an idea Eco traces through the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher and others (Eco 1995: esp. 144−68), was present in the nineteenth-century United States, and may underlie Smith's translation of Egyptian funeral papyri into the Book of Abraham (later incorporated into *The Pearl of Great Price*, the fourth volume of scripture in the LDS canon) as well as the claim that the Book of Mormon was translated from "reformed Egyptian" characters (Mormon 9:32, *Book of Mormon*).

The Book of Moses (Smith's expanded version of the opening chapters of Genesis) records that the "language of Adam" and his children was "pure and undefiled" (Moses 6:5−6, *Pearl of Great Price*). Within the larger narrative of the Book of Mormon, the book of Ether relates the account of the Jaredites, who were spared the curse of Babel in answer to prayer, and thus brought the pure Adamic tongue to the New World[21]. In a manuscript document recently made available online by the LDS Church, Smith reports that "the name of God in pure Language" is "Awmen", meaning "the being which made all things in all its parts", that the Son of God is "the Son Awmen", and that angels are "Awmen Angls-men" (J. Smith Jr 1832).

Although the purported recovery of the Adamic language is one of several esoteric aspects of nineteenth-century Mormonism that are downplayed in the current official teaching of the LDS Church[22], it survives in the hymn "Adam-ondi-Ahman", named after the supposed dwelling place of Adam and Eve after their expulsion from Eden, which Joseph Smith located in Missouri[23]. The name has been variously translated/interpreted, but is probably intended to mean something along the lines of "Adam-[dwelling] with-God".

Rereading Babel: Providential Plurality

Thus we can see that the symbolism of the Adamic language and the hope for a language in which all humanity can communicate perfectly has retained its potency through the centuries. But was there ever a language in which the totality of a thing in its essence was communicated

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[20]   One of the more prominent studies criticised by Brown and others for over-reading incidental connections between Mormon and earlier hermetic sources is Brooke 1994.

[21]   See, for instance, Ether 1:33−43, *Book of Mormon*.

[22]   Hence, the entry for "Adamic Language" in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* notes that "It does not play a central doctrinal role, and there is no official Church position delineating its nature or status" (Robertson 1992: 18).

[23]   Phelps 1835 (hymn 49 in current LDS hymnbook, published 1985); Cf. Berrett 1992.

fully in words? James K. A. Smith, a Christian philosopher who takes seriously the biblical narratives about creation and fall seriously, but also engages sympathetically with continental philosophy, says no. In his book *The Fall of Interpretation*, Smith argues that human beings were never intended to grasp the totality of the world instantaneously and without mediation — that the need to engage the world through thoughts and signs that grasp the world only partially is not a consequence of our fallenness but of our finitude; that God creates us not to know everything in the way that he knows everything but continually to learn, to grow and to discover in ways that are appropriate to our status as finite creatures (J. K. A. Smith 2012).

Smith's discussion steps behind language itself — his focus is on "interpretation", that is, the mental processing of sensory experience prior to its expression in speech or writing, but his thoughts can be applied fairly closely to a theological reflection on the phenomenon of language. Smith observes that not only theologians but also philosophers such as Heidegger and Derrida who disavow any debt to Christian theology, talk about interpretation, the need for the mediation of the world, in terms of fallenness, but Smith argues rather that "if interpretation is constitutive of human be-ing [*sic*] and creaturehood, then it must be 'good' and not necessarily or essentially violent (though it is nevertheless distorted and corrupted by the Fall)" (J. K. A. Smith 2012: 25).

However, it might at first seem biblically problematic to see the diversity of languages now in existence as a good thing, since Genesis suggests that the multiplicity of languages was brought about as a divine punishment at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11)[24]. Eco frequently refers to the Babel narrative, most commonly as connoting a curse on language to be overcome[25]. In *The Name of the Rose*, the disturbed and perversely polyglot monk Salvatore is described as speaking

> not the Adamic language that a happy mankind had spoken, all united by a single tongue from the origin of the world to the Tower of Babel, or one of the languages that arose after the dire event of their division, but precisely the Babelish language of the first day after the divine chastisement, the language of primeval confusion. (Eco 1983: 46−47)

Yet, although still reading the Babel narrative as one of judgment, Smith offers an alternative reading in which the plurality of languages is not itself a curse:

> A second reading of the Babel story, however, will point to unity as the original sin and impetus for violence that Yahweh prevents precisely by multiplication of languages, a *restoration* of plurality. It was a *lack* of difference that occasioned Yahweh's intervention in what was destined to be a violent story of oppression in the name of unity. (J. K. A. Smith 2012: 58)

Likewise, the Croatian-born Yale theologian Miroslav Volf sees the unity of the people at Babel as a totalitarian unity, which excludes the diversity and cultural difference that God intends (1996: 226−28). Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes that God had already commanded the human race after the flood to fill the whole earth, and so for them to con-

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[24]   William Poole notes that "The fall of man and the *confusio linguarum*" at Babel "are temporally separate, and ought to have slightly different implications", but that their implications for language are often conflated in early modern sources (Poole 2003: 274).

[25]   Eco 1995: esp. 8−10, 16−18, 37−39, 42, 96−97, 341−44. Cf. Steiner 1998.

centrate themselves in one place is an act of disobedience (1982: 97−104). Hence the scattering of human beings across the world and the cultural and linguistic diversity that would result was God's original plan, and God's confusion of the languages is a way of forcing them to do what he had intended in the first place.

"Closer to Song": Adam's Poetic Plenitude

Like James K. A. Smith, I would like to conclude by challenging some of the assumptions about Adamic language made by certain early modern writers, especially by John Wilkins, and apparently by Eco, at least in his essay "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language". Among the "various and *casual alterations*" to the original pure language that Wilkins wishes to overcome are "*Equivocals*, which are of several significations", "the ambiguity of words by reason of *Metaphor* and *Phraseology*", "*Synonymous* words, which make Language tedious", and "the *Anomalisms* and Irregularities in Grammatical construction" (1668: 17−19)[26].

Eco's essay also construes Edenic language as a language that seeks to avoid ambiguity, although for Eco, in contrast to Wilkins, this is not ultimately a possible or even desirable state of affairs. I appreciate that for Eco, unlike Wilkins, the referent of Edenic language is not an actual language spoken by a historical Adam and Eve but a theoretical construct, which Eco finds useful to conduct a thought experiment with other goals. In Eco's thought experiment, Adam and Eve speak a language of only six binary pairs (yes/no, edible/inedible, good/bad, beautiful/ugly, red/blue, and serpent/apple), with the middle four pairs being linked in "a series of connotative chains", such that:

Red	= Edible	= Good	= Beautiful
Blue	= Inedible	= Bad	= Ugly

<div align="right">(Eco 1981: 92)</div>

Eco posits that this connotative chain of straightforward binaries is disrupted by God's prohibition of the forbidden fruit, which fatally breaks the semiotic chain by asserting that the "beautiful" fruit is to be placed in the "inedible" category, and thus pushes Adam and Eve into linguistic innovations in which, for instance, the apple becomes "redblue". It is in these disjunctions between appearance and meaning that Eco posits the origins of the "aesthetic" use of language, the discovery of "the *arbitrariness of signs*", and the seeds of the Fall (Eco 1981: 102). Yet Eco's hypothetical Fall appears to be a fortunate fall, freeing humans from an arbitrary system of binary absolutes, and allowing the aesthetic pleasure of linguistic play.

However, I would like to challenge the assumption that the ideal Adamic language described in the canonical text of Genesis is a univocal language where one sign stands for one thing, whether this is seen positively (as by Wilkins) or negatively (as by Eco). While the man's naming of the animals is the first report of human speech in Genesis, the first directly quoted human speech (and the only directly quoted human speech prior to the Fall) consists of Adam's words on his first sight of his mate (not yet named as Eve):

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[26]   See also Fish's summary in Fish 1997: 121−22.

> And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. (Genesis 2: 21−23)[27]

Adam's poetic exclamation here does not consist of univocal language where one sign denotes one thing only.

Another Italian Umberto, the Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto, observes that "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" is a common Hebrew idiom:

> The meaning is: formed from the same parents or from the same family; the source of the bones and the flesh is the same. Our verse is based on this metaphorical expression, as though to say: the first man could employ this phrase in the full sense of the words, in their literal connotation: actually, bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. (Cassuto 1961−64: I:136)

In the case of the Genesis 2 narrative, the metaphor becomes a metonym, or is seen as deriving from a primeval metonymic relationship. But although "in their literal connotation", these words are not univocally literal — neither the bones nor the flesh of the woman in isolation constitute the whole person. The phrase is also one of "synonymous" parallelism, "bone of my bones" being metonymically but not literally equivalent to "flesh of my flesh". Thus the only recorded prelapsarian utterance of Adam in Genesis fails to conform to Wilkins's or Eco's models of Adamic language.

It is as a language made up only of binary oppositions that Eco finds his theoretical Edenic language oppressive. But why assume that Edenic language is limited to binaries? In his historical survey, Eco notes that Rousseau, sceptical of the idea of Edenic perfection, reversed the assumptions of the early modern philosophers. Eco paraphrases Rousseau thus:

> Primitive language spoke by metaphors. This meant that, in a primitive language, words did not, and could not, express the essence of the objects they named. […] Such a primitive language was less articulated, closer to song, than a properly verbal language. (1995: 107)

The one verse of Adam's prelapsarian speech that we have in Genesis is "closer to song", but I would question Rousseau's Enlightenment assumption that this makes it less capable of expressing the essence of things. Rather, the poetic plenitude of Adam's speech more fully expresses the wonder evoked by the woman and his intimate affinity with her than would a prose proposition alone.

This article has paid tribute to Eco by an eclectic itinerary through a variety of fields similar to those on which Eco takes his readers both in his novels and his scholarly work. All of these fields echo Eco's work in tracing the echoes of Edenic language down the centuries, though these echoes are not always conscious. The search continues.

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[27] This passage is briefly discussed in Eco 1995: 8.

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