Language and the Declining World

in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

La tour de babilon

JOHN M. FYLER

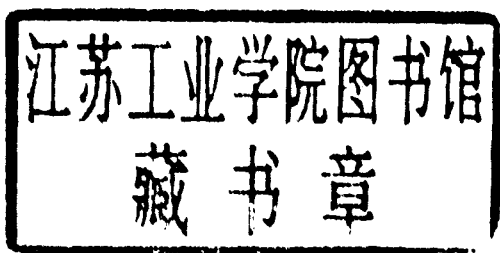# Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun

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Medieval commentaries on the origin and history of language used biblical history, from Creation to the Tower of Babel, as their starting-point, and described the progressive impairment of an originally perfect language. Biblical and classical sources raised questions for both medieval poets and commentators about the nature of language, its participation in the Fall, and its possible redemption. John M. Fyler focuses on how three major poets – Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun – participated in these debates about language. He offers new analyses of how the history of language is described and debated in the *Divine Comedy*, the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Roman de la Rose*. While Dante follows the Augustinian idea of the fall and subsequent redemption of language, Jean de Meun and Chaucer are skeptical about the possibilities for linguistic redemption and resign themselves, at least half-comically, to the linguistic implications of the Fall and the declining world.

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For Julia, Amanda, and Lucy

Acknowledgments

Abbreviations

AHDLMA	*Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge*
CCCM	*Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaeualis*
CCSL	*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*
CFMA	*Classiques Français du Moyen Âge*
ChRev	*Chaucer Review*
CNRS	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*
DS	*Dante Studies*
DVE	Dante Alighieri, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*
EETS	The Early English Text Society
JMRS	*Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
M&H	*Mediaevalia et Humanistica*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MS	*Mediaeval Studies*
PG	*Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Graeca.* Ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1857–66
PL	*Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Latina.* Ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1841–64
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*
RA	*Recherches Augustiniennes*
RS	Rolls Series (*Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*)
RTAM	*Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale*

List of abbreviations

SAC	*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*
SATF	Société des Anciens Textes Français
SD	*Studi Danteschi*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
ST	Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*
UTQ	*University of Toronto Quarterly*
YFS	*Yale French Studies*

Contents

The Biblical history of language

Ferdinand de Saussure and the structuralists, by making language the paradigm for large areas of inquiry, almost inevitably provoked a new interest in an age-old question: how, when, and where did language originate? This question elicited responses throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance – indeed, to the end of the eighteenth century, as the famous discussions by Rousseau and Herder attest. From the late seventeenth century on, however, the responses became increasingly speculative, largely because Genesis lost its status as the infallibly authoritative account of early human history.[1] No longer restricted by a unitary Biblical truth, linguistic speculations could increase and multiply, mixing the plausible with the implausible. To defend against the deluge, the inaugural bylaws of the Société de linguistique de Paris (1865) stipulated that no papers of any sort concerning the origin of language would be accepted. Now that the question has regained some of its former popularity, we may sympathize with the Society's position.[2]

Yet resuscitating this question has brought some earlier views into sharp focus and given them new interest. When we consider patristic and medieval comments on the origin of language, two things are immediately apparent. First, discussion focuses inevitably on the opening eleven chapters of Genesis, from the Creation to the Tower of Babel; second, Augustine's extensive comments on language dominate and provide the framework for later commentary. In Neil Forsyth's synopsis, Augustine's "system of symbolic interpretation" comes of age in *De Doctrina Christiana*, where he describes the effects on language of the Fall. "Adam and Eve found that now they could communicate only by the clumsy method of language and gesture. A dislocation of consciousness produced the distance between the inquiring intellect and

the object of its search. The word of God was veiled, in order to exercise the seeker. This veil, the language of sign and symbol, was both the distance of the mind from God and the avenue by which the philosophic searcher might reach him."[3]

The veil of language, according to context and the temperament of its beholder, may be understood as permeable or impermeable, translucent or opaque. All three of the later medieval poets with whom this book is concerned – Jean de Meun, Dante, and Chaucer – make use of, and significantly add to, the commentarial and Augustinian traditions. They differ, however, in their particular responses to these traditions. Dante is the most thoroughgoing Augustinian of the three; but Augustine and the tradition of Biblical commentary also had a profound effect on the way Jean de Meun and Chaucer thought about language, as both the tool and the resistant material of their craft.

These three poets are also of course indebted to the classical tradition, which intersects at many points with the Judaeo-Christian. Almost everything I have written on Chaucer explicitly or implicitly has concerned the myth of the Golden Age and declining world; once again, as I have come to realize, I am returning to that myth, though this time through the lens of its Biblical analogue in the opening chapters of Genesis. The authoritative summary of this material, in all of its wide-ranging manifestations, has now appeared in James Dean's *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature*[4]; his thorough look at the larger picture allows me to focus more narrowly on its linguistic details, in four chapters that are meant to be cumulative but can also stand alone. This first chapter summarizes the patristic, rabbinical, and medieval Christian commentaries on language at the beginning of the world, in the first eleven chapters of Genesis; I also look at what these commentaries say about Pentecost and the promised renewal of language by the Word as the world nears its end. Chapter 2 analyzes Jean de Meun's discussion of language in the *Roman de la Rose*, framed as it is by Genesis and the Ovidian myth of the Golden Age. Chapter 3 outlines Dante's Augustinian review of linguistic history in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Commedia*. It then looks at the *House of Fame*, in which Chaucer upends Dante's confident poetry of the redemptive Word; instead, like Jean de Meun, he resigns himself with skepticism and comedy to the ambiguities of fallen language. Chapter 4 describes the movement from

the *Second Nun's Tale* to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, as Chaucer's final, bleak reprise of how language and meaning disseminate themselves in the fallen world, a world in which the word can no longer be cousin to the deed.

CREATION AND FALL

Virtually all medieval accounts of language begin with the authorized account: the story in Genesis of its origin and rapid participation in the Fall. The Genesis narrative offers three historical foci for linguistic commentary, one before and two after the loss of Eden; they provide useful points of reference for categorizing the habitual concerns of medieval linguistic thought. The first is the origin of language – Adam's naming of the birds and animals in Paradise (Gen. 2.20); this episode raises broader issues of signification in general, and of the differences between man's language and God's. Next, showing the effects of the Fall, are the sins of Cain, the first murderer and city-builder, and of his descendants, especially Lamech the inventor of bigamy and his children, to whom we owe the arts of civilization (Gen. 4.19–24). The scholia on their words and deeds are akin to pagan remarks on the loss of the Golden Age, and take up such issues as the abuse of language for sophistry or even outright lying. The third and most notorious linguistic event is the building of the Tower of Babel and the consequent confusion of tongues (Gen. 11.1–9), in which the dismaying linguistic results of original sin, already evident in Cain's descendants, become hardened further into the division that will last until Judgment Day. Only then will the restored unity promised by Pentecost, the antitype of Babel, be achieved at last.

There are actually four languages, hierarchically arranged, at the beginning of Genesis. The first is God's, since the Biblical account of language begins even before the beginning of time, with John's elaboration on the first two words of Genesis, "In principio erat Verbum, / Et Verbum erat apud Deum, / Et Deus erat Verbum" (John 1.1) [In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God],[5] and with God's speech before the creation of humankind, his "Let there be light" and assigning of names to Day, Night, Heaven, Earth, and Seas. The second language is Adam's, when he gives names to the birds and animals, and the third the speech he hands on to his

descendants after the Fall. The fourth and most depraved comprises our diverse tongues after Babel. We reascend only with difficulty even to Adam's fallen speech; his Edenic language, let alone God's true Word, is entirely or almost entirely inaccessible.

I take some risks in outlining this hierarchy with such clarity. It accurately describes Milton's portrayal of linguistic history in *Paradise Lost*, but may partially misrepresent the patristic and medieval commentaries on Genesis – and for that matter, Genesis itself – since they do not differentiate between these successive states of language in a unanimous or wholly consistent fashion. If, for example, Hebrew was in fact Adam's language, as almost all the commentators agree, then the Hebrew names for the birds and animals must be their true names, perfectly matching signifier and signified, and logic would suggest that we might recover a linguistic Eden, if not Eden itself, simply by taking a crash course in the true tongue. This is certainly not, however, what Clement V had in mind in 1311 when he asked that Hebrew be taught at every university, even though John Wyclif does argue that traces of Adam's power – the power to evoke obedience from the creatures he named – do survive in the language of magic and incantation: "I believe Hebrew sounds [*voces*] to have greater efficacy than manifold others."[6] Dante is more akin to Milton when he changes his mind between *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and *Paradiso* 26: in the earlier work Hebrew is Adam's language; in the latter, Adam speaks a language that alters radically after the Fall. By contrast, many medieval commentators take no account of linguistic change and decline when they discuss the gap between the Logos and human words: their sight is firmly set on the gulf between the divine and the human, not on calibrating relatively minor variations in the extent of that gulf. Genesis does, however, offer a number of cues for linguistic speculation, and the commentaries give us licence to use its text as the springboard for antiquarian theorizing. Milton is, after all, the heir of this commentarial tradition, which was in full force throughout the seventeenth century[7]; and Milton's medieval predecessors are often surprisingly modern in their linguistic concerns.

To be sure, any attempt to describe the origin of language faces a notable conceptual problem, akin to the definitions of God according to what He is not, or the difficulties Dante and Paul lament in describing Heaven: since their instruments of discourse are themselves affected by

the Fall, fallible human beings cannot easily contemplate, and certainly cannot easily describe, what the unfallen language must have been. Our efforts to do so, tinged by retrospective longing as they are, must participate in the quest that Derrida has so attentively undermined: the quest for a primal unity of sign and thing, an immanence in spoken language that writing keeps pallidly at a distance, and that our speech itself keeps deferring continually beyond our grasp. Earlier exegetes would agree with Derrida when he says that "The sign is always a sign of the Fall. Absence always relates to distancing from God."[8] According to Thierry of Chartres, God can only be spoken of metaphorically [*translatiue*].[9] And the first language in Genesis, God's, is of course not really a language, for the speech of Creation is not really speech in any human sense of the term. With his characteristic brilliance and thoroughness, reflecting the central position of the divine *Verbum* in his theology, Augustine asks a series of questions in *De Genesi ad Litteram* about God's "Fiat lux":

> And how did God say, *Let there be light*? Was this in time or in the eternity of His Word? If this was spoken in time, it was certainly subject to change. How then could we conceive of God saying it except by means of a creature? For He Himself is unchangeable . . .
>
> And was there the material sound of a voice when God said, *Let there be light*, as there was when He said, *Thou art my beloved Son*? . . . And, if so, what was the language of this voice when God said, *Let there be light*? There did not yet exist the variety of tongues, which arose later when the tower was built after the flood. What then was the one and only language by which God said, *Let there be light*? Who was intended to hear and understand it, and to whom was it directed? But perhaps this is an absurdly material way of thinking and speculating on the matter.
>
> What then shall we say? Is it the intellectual idea signified by the sound of the voice, in the words, *Let there be light*, that is meant here by the voice of God, rather than the material sound? And does this belong to the Divine Word . . .?[10]

Yes is the answer, of course. And for Augustine this eternal language, in which to utter is the same as to act,[11] establishes the origin and goal of all human discourse. The eternity and unity of the Word, set against the transience and partiality of human speech, become a characterizing

preoccupation of Augustine's writings. This preoccupation appears, for example, in his comments on knowing things "in the Word of God," as angels do, instead of knowing "the same thing in itself,"[12] and his remark in the *Confessions*: "we returned to the sound of our own tongue, in which a word has both beginning and ending. For what is like to your Word, Our Lord, who abides in Himself forever, yet grows not old and makes all things new!"[13] It is central to his disquisition, in Book Fifteen of *De Trinitate*, on the relation of the Incarnate Word to human speech: the inner word, the word of the human heart, and not the outer, audible or legible one, is the true similitude [*similitudo*] of the divine Word. This inner word has powers that no human language has ("this is the word that belongs to no language, that is to none of what are called the languages of the nations, of which ours is Latin"), and we may apprehend it "not only before it is spoken aloud but even before the images of its sounds are turned over in thought . . . For when we utter something true, that is when we utter what we know, a word is necessarily born from the knowledge which we hold in the memory, a word which is absolutely the same kind of thing as the knowledge it is born from."[14] Yet this likeness in a word – "that word of man, the word of a rational animal, the word of the image of God which is not born of God but made by God" – conceals "a great unlikeness [*dissimilitudo*] to God and the Word of God"; and even after the Last Judgment, when we shall be in the company of God again and have the powers of angels, likeness will be far from identity.[15]

God obviously makes allowance for our limited powers when He uses any human language, even a perfect one[16]; according to a commentary incorrectly attributed to Thomas Aquinas, "God truly speaks to us in human fashion just as a lisping [*balbutiens*] mother condescends to her son."[17] Such divine condescension was once, if only for a brief time, hardly necessary, as Augustine argues in his fascinating reading of Genesis 2.5, "for the Lord God had not rained upon the earth." Now, Augustine says, God does rain upon the earth, "that is, he makes souls grow green again by his word; but he waters them from the clouds, that is, from the Scriptures of the Prophets and Apostles. They are, moreover, rightly called clouds, because those words which resound and pass through the beaten air, with the darkness of allegories also added as if they were covered in some manner by a mist, become like