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Babel and Babble in Benjamin and Burke

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Drawing on the works of Walter Benjamin and Kenneth Burke, this essay argues that the philosophical conditions and conclusions of rhetoric and translation are the same: both trace their origins to the primal fall of language, whether after the Fall from Eden or the curse of Babel, and both find their horizons in an ultimate linguistic motive that, oddly enough, typifies ordinary language use.

Keywords: Rhetoric, translation, babble, Babel, pure language, pure persuasion, chatter, Burke, Benjamin, Kierkegaard

This essay is just that—an essay—from the Latin *exigere*, meaning *to try*, *to test*, and, more in line with our purposes, *to set in motion* in hopes of *driving something out*. We aim to raise more questions than we answer, to provoke more thoughts than those which inspired us, and, ultimately, to elicit more inquiries like those which follow.

In particular, this essay examines the lesser-known kinship between philosophies of rhetoric and philosophies of translation, especially as this kinship finds expression in the works of Walter Benjamin and Kenneth Burke. We argue that the philosophical conditions and conclusions of rhetoric and translation are in fact the same: both trace their origins to the state of Babel after the Fall, and both find their horizons in an ultimate linguistic motive.

By way of conclusion, we argue that Benjamin and Burke found the ultimate linguistic motives of translation and rhetoric in a modern communicative practice that continues to intrigue scholars across the humanities and soft social sciences: *everyday talk*. In support of this argument, and in line with recent studies of ordinary language use, we end this essay as suggestively as it began by recalling, if only for a brief allusive moment, the conceptual foundation of Benjamin's description of ordinary language use, namely, "the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, 'prattle' [*Geschwätz*]."

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Benjamin and Burke share much in common. Born within five years of each other in the 1890s, each made his living, such as it was, as a now vanished breed, the independent man of letters. Both worked as translators—Benjamin from the French, and Burke from the French and German. Each was a sui generis literary Marxist whose deviationist tendencies brought them into strained relations with the Party, especially their shared fascination for unorthodox registers of thought and language. Both were politically committed to the common but intellectually drawn to the esoteric. Both were strong readers of biblical narrative, especially with regards to the philosophy of language, and this, among many points of convergence, will be our focus in this brief essay.

There were contrasts as well: the German-Jewish Benjamin (1892-1940) had a shortened life, dying suddenly at his own hand from morphine, while the American-Irish-Catholic Burke (1897-1993) lived twice as long as Benjamin, apparently sustaining his great longevity with copious amounts of alcohol. Both knew of artificial paradises and profane illuminations, and lived off of the Romantic legacy of critique through extremity. Though they probably never knew of each other's existence when they were both alive, the passage of time reveals them as a key twentieth-century constellation of critical thought about language and the limits of expression.

The two thinkers, then, share an obvious kinship. But the kinship—at once etiological and eschatological—between their philosophies of rhetoric and translation has hardly been explored. Least explored of all is the relationship these philosophies suggest between ordinary language use in the ultimate linguistic motives of rhetoric

and translation. What Benjamin highlights in his early return to Kierkegaard and Burke suggests in his perennial return to Freud is an object of critical inquiry that philosophers of rhetoric and translation alike are hesitant to embrace: *ordinary rhetorical culture*.

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"The *Rhetoric*," writes Kenneth Burke in his landmark 1950 study, "must lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the War of Nerves, the War." More specifically, he goes on to explain, "Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall."[1]

What is the state of Babel after the Fall? It is a state of plurality, partisanship and, as Burke is careful to insist, as if echoing the American founding fathers, "factional division." Accordingly, rhetorical inquiry "considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another."[2]

But if the post-Babel world is a state of social antagonism it is also one of cognitive confusion. Of the many meanings readable into the Hebrew Babel such as *Babylon* or *gate of the gods* there is an incontestable pun in Genesis 11:9 between the toponym *Babel* and the Hebrew verb, *balal*, meaning "to confuse." The story goes something like this: the monolingual descendants of Noah settle in Shinar (Sumeria) and, almost as a defensive strike against eventual dispersion, decide to establish a city, name, and collective identity symbolized by the erection of a monumental tower "whose top will reach into heaven" (Gen. 11:4). Whether their language is the pure Adamic tongue or some postlapsarian lingua franca, and whether Hebrew was the language of paradise, the text does not specify; at least all biblical names in Genesis are of Hebrew origin until two generations after Noah. God visits the earth, notices the tower, realizes its potential, and decides to intervene by confounding the builders' language and scattering them around the globe (Gen. 11:5-9). The work grinds to a halt, leaving the tower a desolate construction site, and the hubris of global cooperation, perhaps especially the hubris to reach heaven on its own terms, is forever after closed to humanity.

In some of his earliest writings, Benjamin founds his analysis of our confounded social and linguistic state on an earlier moment in Genesis. In Eden, language was the name, the name was knowledge, and knowledge was immediate. The language of Paradise yielded an immediate knowledge of the things it named. "Even the existence of the Tree of Knowledge cannot conceal the fact that the language of Paradise was fully cognizant," Benjamin postulates in his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," a text steeped in German

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[1] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 22.

[2] Ibid., 34, 22. Most incorrigible of these divisions, Burke goes on to insist, is "the extreme division of labor under late capitalist liberalism," which has "transformed the state of Babel into an ideal" (31).

romanticism, especially the idea that nature itself, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, participates in a form of language, mute or melancholy though it may be.[3]

Enter the snake. "The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless," Benjamin goes on to explain, and this nameless knowledge is "the only evil known in the paradisiacal state."[4] Whatever else it entails, language after the Fall is symptomatic of this nameless evil. After the fall, language is no longer free to be: it is burdened with the obligation to mean. "The word must communicate something besides itself [*Das Wort soll* etwas *mitteilen (außer sich selbst)*]. That is truly the Fall of the spirit of language." God's creative word reaches out beyond itself to shape worlds in ontological immediacy--let there be light!--but the fallen human word, shriveled to the minimal function of meaning, is like a grotesque parody of God's word. Language once made worlds; now it transferred meaning. The duty to refer is both the task and the trauma of postlapsarian language.

The spiritual essence of language is communicated in language, not through language: "Es ist fundamental zu wissen, daß diese geistige Wesen in der Sprache mitteilt und nicht durch die Sprache."[5] Pushing against German usage, Benjamin makes mitteilen into an intransitive verb: communication for him needs no object. Indeed, in the opaque suggestiveness of much of this essay, Benjamin seeks himself to create a kind of language that might redeem us from the burden of semantics. Key words in Benjamin's essay are *mittelbar* and *unmittelbar*—"mediate" and "immediate"—terms which, alongside their phonetic sibling, *mitteilbar*, will play a key role in Benjamin's theory of translation. Unlike *mitteilbar*, however, which is anchored in the verb *mitteilen*, meaning "to communicate" (or, as Samuel Weber rightly insists, "to impart"), *mittelbar* and *unmittelbar* derive from the German noun *Mittel*, meaning "means" (as in "a means to an end"). Language before the Fall is *a noninstrumental medium in which language communicates itself immediately, without means, as a pure medium. (*For Benjamin, the term *Medium* always had the sense of a milieu or environment rather than an apparatus or technology, even when he wrote about photography or cinema; in this he stayed true to German Romanticism.) Before the fall, language "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication."[6] In sharp contrast, language after the Fall is *an instrumental means through which humans attempt to communicate something mediated, something external, something other than language as*

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[3] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man" (1916), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 (1913-1926)*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 71. German: "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen," in Walter Benjamin, Sprache und Geschichte: Philosophische Essays (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992), 30-49.

[4] Ibid., 71.

[5] Another philosopher of language influenced by German idealism made a similar prepositional gambit in 1916: "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may be fairly said to exist in transmission, in communication." John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 5 (original emphasis).

[6] Benjamin, "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man," 65.

such. "The means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being."[7]

Benjamin continues: "The knowledge of things resides in the name, whereas that of good and evil is, in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, 'prattle' [*Geschwätz*], and knows only one purification and elevation, to which the prattling man [*der geschwätzige Mensch*], the sinner, was therefore submitted: judgment."[8] In short, language after the Fall is *prattle*. Medium gives way to means, immediacy gives way to mediation, and the purity of the creative Word (as the name) gives way to the plurality of human languages (as prattle). "In stepping outside the pure language of the name [*der reinen Sprache des Namens*], man makes language a means [*Mittel*] . . . and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign [bloße *Zeichen*]; and this later results in the plurality of languages."[9] And prattle leads not only to the plurality of languages, but also to their evacuation. The Fall from Paradise, Benjamin contends, was a fall into "the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, [*den Abgrund der Mittelbarkeit aller Mitteilung, des Wortes als Mittel*] of the idle word, into the abyss of prattle."[10]

Which brings us back to Babel: "The enslavement of language in prattle [*Verknechtung der Sprache im Geschwätz*] is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence. In this turning away from things, which was enslavement, the plan for the Tower of Babel came into being, and linguistic confusion with it."[11] Liberation from such double enslavement would cure the melancholy sadness of nature, humans, and things. Such liberation was the task of the poet--and of the translator.

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Linguistic confusion is the condition of possibility for translation. "It is the task of the translator," Benjamin writes in his 1921 essay on the topic, "to release in his own language that pure language [*reine Sprache*] which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language captive [*gefangene*] in a work in his re-creation of that work."[12] To be sure, a *Knecht* is not a *Gefangener*. But they are closely related: a *Knecht* is a servant, a vassal, a slave; and a *Gefangener* is a captive, a convict, a prisoner. Both suggest conditions of restraint, confinement, and subjection. Translation is charged with the task of liberating pure language from similar conditions—conditions which it endures in the human word. Its task is not simply diplomacy between languages, but the work of liberation [*Befreiung*].

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[7] Ibid., 65.
[8] Ibid., 71.
[9] Ibid., 71.
[10] Ibid., 72.
[11] Ibid., 72.
[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (1921), trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 (1913-1926)*, 261. German: "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," in Walter Benjamin, Sprache und Geschichte: Philosophische Essays (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992), 50-64.

Translation for Benjamin is not the transfer of content between languages, but something much more utopian: the reconciliation of languages with each other. A translator from French into German should make German take on the feel and being of French. The task is the messianic one of building peace on earth among languages, not creating a stock exchange of meanings among them. Translation is a return to the condition before Babel at a later and higher turn of the historical spiral, where nation shall speak peace unto nation.

According to Benjamin, the human word varies in quality. The lower the quality an utterance is, the more *mittelbar* it is, and the more *mittelbar* it is, the less translatable it is. The higher the quality an utterance is, the more *unmittelbar* it is, and the more *unmittelbar* it is, the more translatable it is. The lowest quality, least translatable utterances are *informative* and find expression in *prattle*. The highest quality, most translatable utterances are *religious* and find expression in *scripture*. Thus he spins one of his paradoxical inversions: translatability is correlated with the density of hidden pure language.

In prattle and scripture alike, "there remains in addition to what can be conveyed [*Mitteilbaren*] something that cannot be communicated [*Nicht-Mitteilbares*]"—an "ultimate, decisive element . . . beyond all communication [*über alle Mitteilung*]." As in his earlier essay on language, Benjamin describes this incommunicable aspect of the human word, again, as "pure language" (*die reine Sprache*). "In this pure language—which no longer intends anything or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages—all communication [*Mitteilung*], all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum [*Schicht*] in which they are destined to be extinguished."[13]

Translation points the way to this pure linguistic stratum. "In translation the original rises to a higher and purer linguistic air [*Luftkreis der Sprache*], as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure; neither can it reach that level in all the parts [*Teilen*] of the form [*Gestalt*]. Yet, in a wonderfully impressive manner, it at least points the way [*hindeutet*] to this region: the predestined, failed realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages."[14] Miss the nuance of this airy metaphor, "*Luftkreis der Sprache*," and we miss its bearing on the task of the translator. *Luft* is the German word for "air," and *Kreis* the German word for "circle." But *Kreis* can also mean "sphere," "district," and even "county." Hence the German verb *kreisen*, meaning "to circle" and, more suggestively, "to circulate." The region to which translation "points the way" is airy but not entirely atmospheric, spatial but not quite celestial. At the risk of putting too fine a point on it, we might say this region is *circumferential*. It lies just beyond the edges, the outskirts, of the human word, in a certain empyrean purity, which is guaranteed to bring about our failure.

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[13] Ibid., 261.
[14] Ibid., 257.

This may explain Benjamin's use of *Schicht* in his description of pure language. *Schicht* is a geological term, having more to do with the horizontal, earthbound movement of strata than it does with vertical, heavenly ascents. At its furthest reaches, *Schicht* marks the point at which the earth meets the sky in the *Gesichtskreis*, or horizon. The *Schicht* of pure language is the *horizon* of the human word, Benjamin suggests, and the task of the translator is to point us toward this horizon. And not only to point us toward it, but also—as he further suggests with the verb *hindeutet*, from the German *deuten*, meaning "to construe"—to help us *make sense* of this horizon.

Which brings us back to *A Rhetoric of Motives*. If Benjamin sets us between heaven and earth, Burke puts us in the wrangle of the marketplace. If pure language is the horizon of translation, *pure persuasion* is the horizon of rhetoric. And what Benjamin tells us about pure language—that it points us beyond intention, beyond meaning, beyond sense, beyond expression, beyond communication, beyond instrumentality—Burke also tells us about pure persuasion: it points us "beyond the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard" to a realm of "absolute communion, beseechment for itself alone, praise and blame so universalized as to have no assignable physical object," a realm in which motive and purpose, agency and appeal, no longer lend themselves to instrumental uses of persuasion for "extra-verbal advantage"—in short, a realm in which rhetorical artistry has given way to meta-rhetorical address. [15]

This is not to suggest that pure persuasion plays no part in the linguistic scrambles and rhetorical wrangles of the Human Barnyard. On the contrary, just as pure language exists "in embryonic or intensive form" in the human word—as a seed to be grown, ripened, and matured in translations, Benjamin claims—so also does pure persuasion operate at the level of rhetorical motive: "though what we mean by pure persuasion in the absolute sense exists nowhere, it can be present as a motivational ingredient in any rhetoric, no matter how intensely advantage-seeking such rhetoric may be." [16] Even prattle, so the argument goes, can have pure persuasion as a motivational ingredient. On this point, Burke is adamant: "the *ultimate reaches* in the principle of persuasion are implicit in even the *trivial* uses of persuasion." [17]

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So where does this leave us? If translation can be one of rhetoric's conceits, and vice versa, it is because their conditions and conclusions are the same. Both trace their origins to the primal fall of language, whether after the Fall from Eden or the curse of Babel, and both find their horizons in an ultimate linguistic motive—one which turns out to be surprisingly ready-to-hand.

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[15] Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 265, 269.
[16] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 255; Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 269.
[17] Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 179.

As Benjamin and Burke were also careful to insist, the ultimate linguistic motives of translation and rhetoric are present ordinary language use. Pure language and pure persuasion are both active ingredients in everyday talk. By way of conclusion, we would like to take this insight one step further, suggesting that the ultimate linguistic motives of translation and rhetoric may have more in common with everyday talk than Benjamin or Burke intimated. And we would like to do so by returning, if only for a brief allusive moment, to the conceptual foundation of Benjamin's description of ordinary language use, namely, "the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, 'prattle' [*Geschwätz*]."

From Plato's struggle to elude "the madness of the multitude" to Kant's lament for "the great unthinking mass," the history of Western thought is riddled with tagline derisions of ordinary public life.[18] But it was not until Kierkegaard coined the term "chatter" (*snak*) that this ridicule began to center on the *communicative practices* of ordinary public life. "What is it *to chatter* [*at snakke*]?" he asked in the mid-1840s, an era he identified, with almost anthropological precision, as a watershed moment in the mutation of publicity and the public sphere. "It is the annulment of the passionate disjunction between being silent and speaking." To illustrate this talkative annulment, he recalls the dysfunctional grandfather clock of a family he once visited:

> The trouble did not show up in a sudden slackness of the spring or the breaking of a chain or a failure to strike; on the contrary, it went on striking, but in a curious, abstractly normal, but nevertheless confusing way. It did not strike twelve strokes at twelve o'clock and then once at one o'clock, but only once at regular intervals. It went on striking this way all day and never once gave the hour.[19]

Just as the regular strokes of this grandfather clock allowed it to continue keeping time autonomously without any reference to the public world of collective time, so also does chatter communicate nothing more than its abiding yet off-kilter status as a means of communication. "The vehicle of communication, language as structure and act, remains in operation, but it no longer *works*, for whatever it carries is somehow 'nothing'," Peter Fenves explains of prattle. "Utterances are neither garbled nor indecipherable nor meaningless; rather they have become, for all their clarity, idle vehicles, vehicles without content, vehicles in which 'nothing' is said."[20] And herein lies the significance of chatter for philosophers of rhetoric and translation, especially those keen on Burke's theory of "pure persuasion" and

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[18] Plato, *Republic*, 496c; Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55.

[19] Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 97, 80.

[20] Peter Fenves, *"Chatter": Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 1-2.

Benjamin's notion of "pure language." Unlike the classical rhetorical canon of delivery, which is premised on the ability of speech to convey something, and contrary to the conceptual history of translation, which derives from the Latin *transferre*, meaning to carry across, *chatter delivers nothing*. In this, chatter discovers a surprising affinity with poetry and scripture.

This is not to suggest that chatter withdraws from language (resulting in meaninglessness) or that it fails to communicate (resulting in unintelligibility). Rather, it means that *chatter is capable of communicating a linguistic void.* "The emptiness of 'chatter' brings a specifically linguistic 'nothingness' and a specifically linguistic 'insubstantiality' into view and, in so doing, removes the assurance that a specific language—or language at all—is being spoken."[21] Like pure language, chatter exists beyond reference, beyond meaning, beyond instrumentality, beyond intention. It marks the point at which spoken discourse has abandoned all objects of communication other than itself. Thus, if chatterers have *nothing to say*, it is not because they are unable to communicate, but because what they communicate *cannot be said*. It is the medium of speech itself, in its "pure and endless mediality," that finds expression in their talk.[22] "When chatter takes place, language itself, and not an 'existing' subject, speaks."[23] In chatter we find language glorying in itself as medium and nothing more.

In this sense, chatter is also the site at which spoken discourse loses its rhetorical purpose, and in losing its rhetorical purpose arrives at what Burke famously describes as its *pure purpose*—"a kind of purpose which, as judged by the rhetoric of advantage, is no purpose at all, or which might often look like sheer frustration of purpose."[24] Frustration of this sort is an essential—and essentially enjoyable—aspect of pure persuasion.

> Pure persuasion involves the saying of something, not for an extraverbal advantage to be got by the saying, but because of a satisfaction intrinsic to the saying. It summons because it likes the feel of a summons. It would be nonplused if the summons were answered. It attacks because it revels in the sheer syllables of vituperation. It would be horrified if, each time it finds a way of saying, "Be damned," it really did send a soul to rot in hell.[25]

So also with chatter. With no shortage of words, chatter engages in a teleological suspension of the semantic functions of spoken discourse—and always in service to its own continuation. "One who chatters presumably does chatter about something, since the aim is to find something to chatter about," Kierkegaard quips. With no

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[21] Ibid., xii.
[22] Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 59.
[23] Fenves, *"Chatter"*, 236.
[24] Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 270.
[25] Ibid., 269.

aim or anchor other than itself, this way of speaking becomes "a frivolous philandering among great diversities," in which one "chatters about anything and everything and continues incessantly." Like teeth rattling against teeth, chatter exists in "a state of abstract non-cessation."[26]

Interminability of this sort is also a defining feature of pure persuasion. Much as chatterers flit from topic to topic, ever in search of something new to bandy about, practitioners of pure persuasion sustain themselves and their discourse on *self-interference*. "If you were winsomely persuasive, you could keep on persuading only by yourself supplying the interferences which you overcome in your audiences," Burke shrewdly notes. "For a persuasion that succeeds, dies."[27] Successful persuasion is like Benjamin's nameless language: it stops being itself and becomes something else, meaning or action. Without self-interference, effective rhetorical appeals would be always already en route to oblivion, convincingness being the surest sign of their completion. Only by sacrificing attainable rhetorical advantage, and with it apparent rhetorical purpose, can speakers prolong the life of their persuasive artistry.[28]

If pure persuasion operates meta-rhetorically, sacrificing ulterior motive, attainable advantage, and apparent purpose in order to prolong moments of persuasive artistry, we might say that chatter operates *meta-communicatively*, talkatively evacuating public speech of its content, substance, and intention—and always in service to more talkative evacuations of public speech—until its only remaining content, substance, and intention is the act of public speech itself. To be sure, all spoken discourse is rhetorically eventful. But it is chatter that reveals spoken discourse as a *rhetorical event*.

Suffice it to say: there is more in common between chatter and the ultimate linguistic motives of translation and rhetoric than Benjamin or Burke intimated. As an object of critical inquiry invested with pure language and allied with pure persuasion, chatter calls our attention to the linguistic structure (chatter as medium) and the communicative act (chatter as event) of spoken discourse itself. Much remains to be said of this medial-evental mashup, especially among theorists working in the wake of Burke and Benjamin, as well as their predecessors (such as Georg Simmel). But for now our claim is this: in its apparent lack of content and pure self-generation, chatter approaches the same layer of pure language that Benjamin found in Eden and pure persuasion that Burke found in the human barnyard. Poetry, scripture, and chatter are all forms of language redeemed from the duty to have a use.

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[26] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 99, 100, 97, 80

[27] Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 274.

[28] This argument is developed more fully in Samuel McCormick, "Arguments from Analogy and Beyond: The Persuasive Artistry of Local American Civic Life," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100 (2014): 186-212.

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Plato, *Republic*.