Godfrey Goodman and the Language of Adam

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Reformers in seventeenth-century England often spoke of a language of nature, sometimes referred to as the language of Adam. By this, they did not refer to what we would call a natural language, like English or French, but to a univocal language where words and things corresponded perfectly. They insisted that it need not be a dream; it could be made a reality if students would only turn from syllogisms to nature itself. With this insistence, Francis Bacon and others created the false impression that language theory in their time was essentially Adamic, committed to the view that all languages contained the remnants of the original language. They also left the impression that their plans for a universal language were entirely new. In fact, the medieval grammarians had questioned the Adamic model and had studied the universal properties of language. A useful corrective may be found in the works of Godfrey Goodman, a conservative Augustinian who was familiar with the writings of Bacon’s Scholastic predecessors. While others hoped to repair “the ruins of Babell” (Webster 23), Goodman recognized that Babel would be as much a mistake the second time as it had been the first, and more so because it “could not be built but with church stones” (Creatures 34). Using Scholastic logic and a remarkable literary talent, he argued that mankind would have to wait for a second Pentecost (Fall of Man 308).

Born in 1583, Goodman entered Westminster School as a chorister in 1592. He soon impressed his teachers, including his “most dere and louing schoolemaster, M’ William Camden . . . ye famous & most renowned Antiquarie of our age.” He won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1599 and graduated from the university in 1604. He served as Vicar of Stapleford Abbots in Essex from 1606 to 1620, during which time he
gave several celebrated sermons and won the respect of powerful allies such as Bishop Launcelot Andrews. After a series of preferments, he reached the height of his career in 1625, when he was installed as the Bishop of Gloucester and was asked to preach the funeral sermon for James I (A. Fraser 112). He soon created a scandal, however, by teaching dogma which seemed dangerously close to Rome. Convicted of bribery in an attempt to retain his power, he came to differ as strongly with Archbishop William Laud as with the arch-Protestant William Prynne. He was stripped of his office and imprisoned. His estates were seized and looted—he had accumulated no fewer than six—and he was sequestered from his last rectory. He spent his final years as a private scholar in the library of Robert Cotton. There he wrote a book on the Trinity and Incarnation, which he dedicated to Cromwell. He also wrote a vindication of the court of King James, answering accusations in a servant’s diary; a history of the Church throughout the ages, now lost; and a last testament, published posthumously. He died in poverty in 1656.

In the dedication to Cromwell, Goodman explained that he had begun to write out of a loathing he formed while still at Cambridge for the followers of Faustus Socinius. Socinians, he said, were “so carried away with their own fancies, under pretence and colour of adhering to their own Natural Reason, that they deny the Mysteries of our Christian Faith and religion; which are indeed above Reason, beyond the reach of Reason, but no way contrary to Reason” (Two Great Mysteries A2r). Goodman had opposed this early form of deism in “a publick disputation” held some forty-five years earlier, perhaps in the schools at Cambridge, and had resolved to continue his opposition:

I did resolve to examine every Mystery of Faith, and every Miracle wrought in confirmation of those Mysteries, (for it so pleaseth God that works above natural power should witness the truth of words above natural knowledge) according to the Rules of Philosophy; and I began with the first, proving the fall of Adam from Paradise by Natural Reason. Not that I was able to prove the manner of the fall, as that it should be by tasting the forbidden fruit, by the tempting of a Serpent; but I shewed the truth and certainty of his fall, by those many punishments of sin, which are yet extant, and may be seen in Nature.

(A2r-v)
Goodman expanded his sermon on Adam into a popular book entitled *The Fall of Man, or the Corruption of Nature, Proved by the light of our naturall Reason* (1616). He tried to establish the truth of Christianity by reasoning correctly. He also wanted to test the limits of reason, for he held the widespread belief that human reason had been corrupted in the fall from grace. He was wary of efforts to perfect the reason and undo the hold of corruption, for he accepted St. Augustine’s doctrine of the *felix culpa*: no fall, no salvation. To underestimate the power of corruption was to diminish the effects of original sin and with it the promise of redemption. In *The Fall of Man*, he offered what has been called the most thorough study of corruption ever produced in Renaissance England (Williamson 126–27).

Others had sounded the warning that the world was dangerously, perhaps fatally, corrupt. John Donne had written in *An Anatomie of the World*:

So thou sicke World, mistak’st thy selfe to bee  
Well, when alas, thou’rt in a Lethargie.  

(23–24)

Goodman began on a similar note:

when I consider the diseases of these times,  
together with all the signes, tokens, and symptomes:  
alas, alas, I feare a relapse, I feare a relapse, lest  
the world in her old doting age, should now  
againe turne infidell, and that the end of vs be  
worser than the beginning. The sicke patient  
indeed will not confesse her own disease: but this  
does not acquit her, rather it makes her state more  
dangerous.  

(*Fall of Man* 3)

As a fashionable author, whose book was soon reprinted, Goodman provided a familiar target for any champion of progress. The challenge came in 1627, when Archdeacon George Hakewill answered Goodman point by point in *An Apologie or Declaration of the Power and Providence of God*. While Goodman was fighting to secure his position in the church, he wrote a cordial reply to Hakewill, which he published with a third printing of his book (1629). Hakewill reprinted Goodman’s reply with a rejoinder in a third edition of the *Apologie* (1635), and the two names have been connected ever since. Hakewill has attracted more attention, as he is on the side of progress, and Goodman is now known chiefly for having “provoked the first significant defence of modernity in England.” In matters of language, and indeed of politics, Goodman may not have been so reactionary as historians suggest.
But before we can assess his pronouncements on language, we must take account of the underlying issues.

Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, theological comments on language referred to half a dozen biblical texts. Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2:19-20 gave man a role in the act of creation and an authority over the lower orders. God's creative Word in John 1:1-3 exalted language in a clear echo of the opening of Genesis. And the story of Babel in Genesis 11:1-10 explained why speech is now imperfect. It seemed only natural to infer that before Babel humans had a different kind of language from those now in use, not just a single language. From biblical times, prophets had foretold a lingua Chanaan spoken by all believers (Isaiah 19:18) and a labium electum (Zephaniah 3:9) given to man in the last days. The gift of tongues at the first Pentecost showed the excitement of universal communication, which scoffers likened to the effects of new wine (Acts 2).

The account in Genesis merely stated that Adam chose names, but it became a commonplace of theology that the names were fully appropriate to the things they described. Aquinas articulated the argument:

[Adam] himself gave names to the animals, as it says in Genesis. And names ought to fit the nature of the things named; so Adam understood the natures of all animals, and by the same token understood everything else.*

This belief persisted throughout the Renaissance; it encouraged scholars to study Hebrew, which was regarded as the oldest language and therefore the closest to the language of Adam (Katz). It promoted etymologies, often of a fanciful sort. For example, a seventeenth-century schoolmaster wrote that "Adam by seeing into the nature of every Creature, could see their names... so God called the day jam because of the jumbling noise that is made in it" (qtd. in Padley, Vernacular 364). Finally, it provided an ideal for educators and reformers of education. In Paradise Lost (7.493), Milton had the Archangel Raphael, as the world's first schoolmaster, remind Adam that "thou thir Natures knew'st and gav'st them names." In prose, Milton told Samuel Hartlib that the goal of education was "to repair the ruins of our first parents," that is, to undo the effects of original sin (2:368). How education could be improved, and with it the lot of man, was a subject of heated debate in the Puritan Commonwealth. In a famous exchange, the Puritan minister John Webster turned to cabalism and the doctrines of Jacob Boehme while the academician Seth Ward drew from mathematics. Both called themselves true disciples of Bacon, whose pronouncements on Adamic language deserve note here.10
Bacon had reasoned that the original sin was pride, not knowledge:

it was not that pure light of natural knowledge, whereby man in Paradise was able to give unto every living creature a name according to his property, which gave occasion to the fall; but it was an aspiring desire to attain to that part of moral knowledge which defineth of good and evil, whereby to dispute God's commandments and not to depend upon the revelation of his will.\(^\text{11}\)

Knowledge could indeed restore man to his original perfection. The end of knowledge, Bacon added, was a return to paradise on earth:

a restitution and reinvesting in great part of man to the sovereignty and power (for whenssoever he shall be able to call the creatures by their true names he shall again command them) which he had in his first state of creation.

(188)

Before man could return to Eden, however, he had to undo the curse of Babel. To this end, Bacon promoted a new Philosophical Grammar as "an antidote against the curse of the confusion of tongues."\(^\text{12}\) Bacon called for what would now be considered comparative linguistics, hoping that the best features of each language could be combined into a rational and international language. But his proposal drew on medieval grammar, perhaps to a greater extent than is realized today.

Bacon recognized two sorts of "universal notation," two ways that signs could be chosen for a synthetic language. Signs could have meaning \textit{ex congruo}, by conforming somehow to the things that they signified; or they could have meaning \textit{ad placitum}, by having meanings on which all users could agree.\(^\text{13}\) The distinction went back to Aristotle, and had been made repeatedly in medieval commentaries on his \textit{De interpretatione} (Brinkmann 21–44). Aquinas wrote that names were imposed either by nature (\textit{impositio secundum naturam}) or by consensus (\textit{impositio ad placitum}). That is, the name could express the quality of a thing or thought, or it could provide an agreed upon designation for the thing. The first of these possibilities is close to the Adamic theory and to the onomatopoeic theory which linguists refer to as the "bow-wow" or "ding-dong" explanation of the origin of language. But although Aquinas articulated the logic behind the Adamic theory, he did not subscribe to it. Rather, he followed Aristotle in limiting natural sounds to those describing the passions (\textit{pathemata}).\(^\text{14}\)
Other grammarians of Aquinas's day thought differently. Many of those who were known as speculative grammarians maintained, with John of Dacia, that natural sounds could apply to intellectual conceptions. For in attempting to understand the mode of signifying (modus significandi) by which meaning was attached to a sound (vox), they had been obliged to consider the mode of understanding (modus intelligendi) by which an intellectual conception was attached to a thing or fact (res). These modistae, as scholars now call them, concentrated on the universal theory of grammar—on questions which applied to all languages rather than to any one language—and they glimpsed the possibility of a purified language of the understanding. This was not an Adamic language, however, for they saw that meaning came from the understanding, not the thing. Nor was it a simple matter. As finally evolved in the treatise De modus significandi sive grammatica speculativa, this theory of grammar considered the thing's mode of being (modus essendi) and the word's mode of cosignifying or having meaning in syntax (modus consignificandi). Further, it subdivided significance into several modes: active and passive, general and specific, essential and accidental. This treatise was long attributed to Duns Scotus and appeared in the 1639 edition of his works, but is now thought to be by one Thomas of Erfurt.

Like other products of the Middle Ages, the speculative grammar seemed absurdly convoluted to the Renaissance Humanists. Rabelais had his Gargantua study it for eighteen years and eleven months before discovering that it taught nothing but terminology (bk.1, ch.14). Nevertheless, scientists remained fascinated with the prospect of learning the "signs of things," as Thomas of Erfurt promised. Bacon's "Philosophical Grammar" stemmed from a study of "the notes of things" and so did other proposals. Descartes weighed the prospect of a universal language in a celebrated letter to Marin Mersenne, before deciding that it would be humanly impossible (1:76-80). Goodman's book was written between the dream of Bacon (first sounded in The Advancement of Learning in 1605) and the sober awakening of Descartes (in 1629). We are now ready to see how Goodman reasoned.

Summarizing The Fall of Man, Victor Harris wrote:

The whole work is a lament, frequently eloquent and even lyrical, over the unhappiness of man. The reasoning is resolved into one argument: man's sufferings can only be punishments of his sin, and we need but see his misery to know that he is fallen: the miseries of man are thus the "signs" of his corruption. Man's corruption, in turn, causes (and proves) the world's corruption;
the great world, too, is mortal in the death of the
little world.\textsuperscript{16}

The book falls into three parts, the first concerning the constitutional
problem of having an immortal soul in a mortal body, the second regarding
the miseries that arise from human vanity, and the third devoted mostly to
the biblical punishments. An appendix complements the argument from
reason with an argument from faith. In Part III, Goodman includes two
dozen closely reasoned paragraphs on the confusion of tongues, showing
how problems of communication have caused error and strife ever since
Babel. He apologizes for any shortcoming in his argument with the opening
and closing caveat that his tongue is, after all, “confounded” (292, 310).
In the same manner he excuses the printer’s errors as further signs of
corruption (446).

Goodman assumes that all men have descended from Adam and
reasons that all languages would have “the same rootes, and principles,”
if language had not been confounded (292). Attempting to show that
the story of Babel is true history, he first names the pagans who shared
his conviction that language is fallen. Then he notes that the confusion
of tongues was a peculiarly appropriate punishment for pride, since
vainglorious schemes depend on communication. The “barbarous languages”
spoken ever since are permanent punishments: some distort the speaker’s
face, others limit his conversation to material things and hinder his
thought for lack of vocabulary, still others give way to fallacies or lead
to ribaldry, and all are in flux. Goodman does not think that languages
have remained unchanged since Babel; he points out that the words
of our ancestors can be as hard to understand as those of our neighbors and
cites Chaucer as an example. Man has a few universals, like laughter
and the five vowels, but he cannot even transmit his speech from one
generation to the next. We can see this, Goodman says, by observing the
children of immigrants.

Monarchs and merchants have been unable to impose a single language
on others, despite their success in setting laws and regulating trade.\textsuperscript{17}
Religion promises to achieve this noble end but has only forced people to
pray in tongues they do not understand. The obvious reason for these
failures is that language is corrupt. It is difficult “to keepe the heart
and the tongue in an equal pace” or even learn a language (298). As a
result, the wisest of men are seldom the best speakers, and the failure of
speech affects every aspect of civilization. Even the life of Christ and the
history of the Church abound with evidence that language has been a cause
of man’s undoing. Faced with these facts, we are invited to pause at
Goodman’s admonition: “acknowledge the curse of man, in the confusion
of tongues” (299).
Hakewill’s brief rejoinder offers an account of recent progress in grammar, logic, and rhetoric (245-46). It seems to take the greatest exception to the passage Jones singles out for quotation (25), Goodman’s praise of Lombard, Aquinas, Scotus, and Occam as “the light and lampes of all true learning . . . contemned and neglected by this poeticall and phantasticall age, which delights more in words then in substance” (302-3). For Goodman reverses the objections that Humanists raised against Scholasticism; modern wits are further from things than they imagine. He concedes that Scholasticism had several schools of thought and “multitudes of distinctions”; and he cites these failings, along with the general “Defects in Grammar,” as “evident proof of this confusion of tongues” (301, 303). But he praises Scotus and Aquinas, with Occam and Lombard, for trying to establish an “affinity between Logick and Grammar” (301). The praise is central to his argument, falling between the passages on awareness and Adamic language.

Goodman believes, with Bacon, that grammar is a necessary attempt to cope with confusion. He writes in closing, “We have no naturall voyce[,] no naturall tongue, wee cannot speake to the understanding of each other, but Grammar must direct vs and teach vs construction” (391). Like Bacon, he recognizes the chief obstacle to a universal language: the words in the language are not organized on the same principles as the things in nature. Grammar does not follow “the order and course of nature, for in many things which nature hath rankt in one kinde, and giuen them the same properties, yet in grammar you shall find them infinitely to differ in their genders, their numbers, declensions” (301). But where Bacon calls for a philosophical grammar that would bring words closer to things, Goodman states that the Scholastics have already made the attempt and that, although they failed, they “left nothing vndone.” The gaps between languages are too great to be mended. Indeed, a living language, so long as it is alive, “cannot admit a reformation, as being promiscuously dispersed through the mouths of the multitude” (301). Human language can never resemble that of nature or its human counterpart, that of Adam; but these more perfect languages can be understood in Scholastic terms, in terms of mode and imposition.

The ideal of speculative grammar was a “naturall speech and language,” where words convey what Goodman terms “the inward forme” or “the nature of things” (295, 302), but this was an impossible ideal. Man does not speak in a mode appropriate to his being. Man alone has lost the “language of nature”:

Doe not all other creatures of the same kinde, agree in one and the same language of nature, wherby they testifie to each other, either their ioy, or their sorrow? Haue not many birds as much varietie in their notes and tunes, and yet all are
the same in the same kinde; as there are words and syllables which passe between men? I pray, doth it not appeare, in all other workes of nature, that the inward forme doth naturally of her selfe discouer her selfe, by some outward propertie? and why should not the reasonable soule make her selfe knowne by a naturall speech and language, that wee might see the inward man as well as the outward feature? for speech is the only companion, and witnesse of reason.

(295)

The answer to Goodman's first question is yes: only man is doubly cursed. The curse of Babel has put humanity in a paradoxical position. "Is there any thing so proper and peculiar to man, as societie and fellowship," asks Goodman; "and yet for want of one common language, the kind cannot conuerse with it selfe?" (296). Language has not become more "naturall" with the turn from Scholasticism but more "poetical and phantasticall." There is a still greater gap between words and things.

Goodman acknowledges the longing "to reduce the world to one language" (297) and uses this longing to show that man has fallen. Here he draws upon the debate as to whether words are imposed by nature or convention:

It were to bee wished, that we might speake the language of Adam, where names were imposed according to the nature of things; but now it should seeme, there is a great difference, for the most pleasing speech adorned with Metaphors, and Figures, is not the fittest for the discoverie of a truth: and on the contrarie, all the schoole learning, which indeed is the very touch-stone of all truth, and in it selfe is most wise, and farre transcending the ordinarie capacitie, yet suffers the shamelesse and malicious reproach of barbarisime, for want of the elegancie of stile.

(302)

The problem with Scholasticism and Humanism, Goodman goes on to explain, is that human language is now based on arbitrary imposition rather than natural imposition: "the curse was generall in the confusion of tongues: though speech be proper and naturall to man, yet this, or that language, followes the frank and free imposition of man, and hath no ground work
in nature." (303). Goodman accepts the common belief that Hebrew was the original language of Eden but insists that it changed with other languages at Babel. He therefore mocks the opinions “that if a man here taught no other language, then hee should speake Hebrew” (303)—an opinion which became widespread after James IV of Scotland isolated children from birth and declared that they began to speak good Hebrew.19 Goodman also doubts that Hebrew is the tongue of angels, “who speake to each other, by directing the edge of their understanding to each other, as it were opening the glasses, and casting foorth a light to each other” (304). In Paradise, he thinks, man will speak as the angels speak.

Goodman’s views are traditional. They can be traced back to the notion that the creatures are the vestiges or voice of God and together form a book of testimony to the glory of God. They are interesting because they resist the attempt to secularize such themes—to suggest, with Bacon or Herbert of Cherbury, that reason is the mark of divinity in man.20 Instead, Goodman uses the creatures to exalt the Creator, and nowhere more beautifully than in his lyrical sermon The Creatures Praying God: or, the Religion of Dumbe Creatures (1622). Here he returns to the topic of “naturall discourse” and, proceeding along Augustinian lines, establishes a “religion of nature” with the creatures as God’s signs or “foot-steps” (10, 32).21 He describes the creatures “in their Quier, or in their Church-musick,” from the wrens and robins singing treble to the great beasts bellowing the bass (24). Goodman, the former chorister, exclaims:

O excellent Artist, that could so sweetly tune nature to make such a melody, where there is such a concent and agreement on euery side; the parts to the whole, the whole to the parts, each to it selfe, all to the Maker! O excellent melody! here is neither sound, nor voice to the eare, yet a most sweet and delectable harmony, a musicke of nature.

(22)

He claims to speak “without any figure or metaphore” because he is describing a harmony that man has lost with the confusion of tongues (29).

We may suspect, in retrospect, that Goodman is using metaphor and that Adamic language is a poetic and metaphoric language which peeps out in the Bible and in great literature. But we should not think that his vision of the creatures as vestiges of divinity made him a complete enemy of science, as Hakewill suggested. Before Goodman lost his wealth, he planned to leave
his old college at Cambridge a bequest which, he felt certain, would be more useful than words:

all the Mathematicall Instruments, and some things which belong to Chymistrie, together with Optick Glasses, and Herballs, and whatsoever else did tend to the Practise of Philosophy; for seeing Man is not wholly spiritual; therefore I would not have him to content himself onely with the Theorie.

(Two Great Mysteries A2r)

NOTES

1. Hewes 835–36 indexes writings on "Divine origin of language, Adamic theory, and supernatural theories." Other accounts may be found in R. Fraser, Knowlson, Aarsleff, and Katz. My remarks about language reformers are necessarily generalized, and so are my comments on historical scholarship. Bacon represents only one direction that reformers would take, and scholars like Padley are well aware of medieval antecedents.

2. Vossius divided methodical grammar into two categories: natural, concerned with questions common to all languages, and artificial, concerned with the peculiarities of a single language. This Humanist preoccupation with the universal was a carryover from speculative grammar. There are many studies of res et verba as understood in the seventeenth century; I have benefited especially from Padley, Latin Tradition ch.3.

3. Fall of Man 366. The first life of Goodman is that of Wood (2:863–69), who relies heavily on Goodman's dedication in Two Great Mysteries; also see the biography by Lee.

4. Goodman's broadside Petition, addressed to Cromwell, sought relief after he had unsuccessfully petitioned in Chancery for the return of his sequestered cure. It ended with a plea on behalf of the universities: if they could continue to attest the "learning and behaviour" of candidates for the ministry, they would help to "prevent divisions and sects."

5. Goodman told Cromwell that he would withhold this work for posthumous publication because it "cast very foul aspersions upon some great families" (Two Great Mysteries A3r). Before asking Cromwell's aid, he added that he had found only good information on Cromwell's forebear, who wanted Englishmen to learn the Apostles' Creed in English.


7. Hill quotes Goodman (Two Great Mysteries 90) to show Goodman's preoccupation with the "social function of sin" (135). This does not make him a conservative, however. He speaks out against the "shamefull abuse of inclosures" and predicts an upheaval by those who want to return enclosed lands to the people (Fall of Man 248–49).

8. Aquinas, Summa theologiae 13:97 (pt.1a, quest.94, art.3). Aquinas did not subscribe to the theory—given as a rejoinder to his own argument—but simply articulated it.
9. On Milton's use of Edenic language, see Cope ch.2 and Fish ch.3, sec.2.
10. See the reprints in Debus. The linguistic issues in the Webster–Ward debate are discussed in Salmon 90–91.
11. Bacon 187 (Valerius terminus cap.1). A similar remark appears in Bacon 209 (Filiun labyrinthis, par.7).
12. Bacon 523 (De augmentis scientiarum, bk.6, ch.1). This work is a translation and amplification of The Advancement of Learning (1605).
13. Like others of his age, Bacon mistakenly associated the first sort of naturally imposed word with Egyptian hieroglyphics and the consensually imposed word with Chinese ideograms; it remained for a later century to discover that hieroglyphics were arbitrary phonetic symbols and ideograms were highly stylized pictures.
14. Aristotle 25, 27. Aquinas's commentary is translated by Oesterle in the same edition; for further commentaries see Ahrens.
15. Grammatica est de signi rerum; quoted in Bursill-Hall 41. My account of speculative grammar derives largely from his (esp. 22–42); however, I have also benefited from Robins ch.3 and from Pinborg.
17. Goodman must have recalled Augustine's warning in De civitate Dei: all efforts to impose a common language on mankind have proved bloody and ineffective (48:671–72; bk.19, ch.7).
18. The phrase "no naturall voyce" may refer to the complicated (and certainly arbitrary) concept of vox. In addition to the Roman distinction between active and passive voice, he could have considered distinctions between nouns and verbs (Padley, Latin Tradition 47–48).
19. Levitt 121. The progressive Marin Mersenne shared Goodman's skepticism about the extreme antiquity of Hebrew and made a similar remark (bk.1, prop.11). For this reference I am grateful to Professor Hans Aarsleff.
20. See Augustine on vestigia dei in De doctrina Christiana 32:32–33 (bk.2, ch.1); Hugh of St. Victor's on vox dei in Eruditionis disiscalicae 176:790–91 (bk.5, ch.3); and Bonaventura on liber creatorum in Illuminationes in hexameron (Sermon 12).
21. In Two Great Mysteries, Goodman returns to the book topos (26) and mentions his earlier book on the Fall (79). He also discusses the biblical counterparts of the curses of Eden and Babel: the Incarnation of the Word and the gift of tongues (11–13).

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